Polly Comes to Woodbine

POLLY COMES TO WOODBINE

BY

GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

ILLUSTRATED BY F. LILEY YOUNG

BOSTON

LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

Published, August, 1915

Polly Comes to Woodbine

NORWOOD PRESS
BERWICK & SMITH CO.
Norwood, Mass.
U. S. A.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Polly Comes to Woodbine

CHAPTER ONE

THE usually stolid Jethro Baldwin was throbbing with curiosity as the whistle of the afternoon train echoed through the valley and died away in a muffled shriek among the distant hills. He stroked his whitening beard with an impatient little gesture he had, and then squinted one eye to peer along the two ribbons of steel that connected Woodbine with the great world beyond. The train came in sight from a bend in the road, puffing and snorting laboriously as it climbed the heavy grade.

Jethro consulted a big nickel-plated watch,—a clumsy piece of mechanism, but

precious in his eyes because Miranda had presented it to him on his birthday two years before,—shook it to make sure it was going, and then applied it to his ear to quiet any lingering suspicion that it was playing him a trick.

To the station agent, who passed that moment, with a bunch of yellow papers in one hand and a pencil gripped between his teeth, he remarked :

"Late to-night, ain't she?"

"Ten minutes," was the brief answer, mumbled through the pencil.

Then something in Jethro's attitude caught his attention, and forgetting the importance of his errand, he stopped short, and removed the pencil from his mouth.

"Expecting some one on the train?"

"Why, y-yes," stammered Jethro nervously. "A—a little girl, maybe."

He was relieved from farther explanation by the sudden start of his horse, Billy, that, at the near rumbling of the train, pricked

up his ears and showed an inclination to prance away from the post where he was tied.

"Whoa there, now, Billy! What you afraid of?"

Now Billy was train-broken and automobile-broken, and in all the time Jethro had driven him—and that was a good many years, as you could tell by Billy's worn teeth and the few gray hairs showing in his sleek coat—the staid old horse had never shied at anything of man's creation. Once, indeed, he had got frightened and attempted to run away in a fierce thunder-storm, but that was so many years ago that it was only a dim remembrance in Jethro's mind. Billy's queer acting now was a complete mystery. He pranced and reared, jerked and backed, and finally emitted a little snort of fear or disgust. Jethro tugged at the bridle and talked soothingly.

"Well, if this don't beat all! What's got in you, Billy? It can't be the train

you're frightened of, and if it ain't, what is it?"

The train had come to a rumbling halt, and Billy's fear subsided as suddenly as it came. Jethro stroked his neck and patted him on the nose.

"It ain't the girl now, is it, Billy?" he continued. "I swan, I believe it is!"

Old Jethro chuckled good-naturedly, and slapped the arched neck with a caressing hand.

"Who'd 'a' thought it of you, Billy?" he teased. "Jealous before you see her."

Jethro had become so absorbed in quieting and talking to the horse that he completely forgot the important mission that had called him down to Woodbine Station, dressed in his best clothes and his face clean shaven on each side of his chin whiskers just as if it were Sunday. But he was now brought back sharply to the subject that had recently been uppermost in his mind.

Alighting from the train was a little girl of about ten years, clasping a small bag with one hand and holding tight to the arm of the conductor with the other. Jethro caught a glimpse of a cheap denim dress, a roundish hat that half concealed light golden hair, a small, white face, and a pair of long black-stockinged legs. He took note of this as he stalked down the long platform, leaving Billy to care for himself.

"Hello, Jethro!" shouted the young station agent. "Here's your girl!"

The conductor, who had stepped off the train, and to whose arm the girl still clung, turned and surveyed the approaching man with stern, inquisitive eyes.

"Are you Mr. Jethro Baldwin, of Woodbine?" he asked in a voice that seemed to carry a doubt in it.

"Why, yes, I suppose I be," faltered Jethro, taken back by this implied questioning of his identity.

"Well, then, this girl's for you," the

conductor added. "She was placed in my charge. Sign here, please!"

Jethro squinted at the card thrust before him, and as he signed his name at the place designated, his hand trembled and his breath came in short wheezes.

"That will do," snapped the conductor. Swinging around he waved his hand to the engineer, and shouted, "All aboard!"

Jethro stood in a sort of trance. The train started and moved down the track, Jethro watching it as if fascinated by something he had never seen before. Finally a little hand touched his arm and moved softly down it until it slipped into one of his big, work-hardened paws and rested there.

"Are you Mr. Jethro Baldwin?" queried a small, piping voice. "For if you are, I feel greatly relieved. I could almost cry with joy. It's been such a long voyage that I was sure a hundred times I was going round and round the world instead of just

"Sign here, please!"—*Page 12.*

across one little State. How big is this State, Mr. Baldwin? It must be miles and miles wide, and goodness knows how long. Well, I'm thankful I'm here, and nothing dreadful has happened. How's Mrs. Baldwin?"

Jethro removed his hat and wiped his perspiring forehead with a red handkerchief. He saw that the good-looking station agent was grinning across the platform, and feeling that this was a family matter, Jethro led his little charge away.

"She's quite well," he replied to the last question a little confused.

"I'm so glad of that. I was afraid she might be sick. I heard there was a good deal of sickness in the country this year, and it worried me. I was once in the country when a poor woman died, and two days later her sister was taken sick and died too. They said it was typhoid. Isn't it a dreadful disease? Do you have much of it round here?"

Jethro mumbled some inarticulate reply, and tried to get a glimpse of her face, but it was turned away from him, so he could see only half of the profile. The little hand resting in his gave him a queer tingling sensation as the fingers tightened their hold at every step of the unfamiliar walk.

Billy had watched them approach in silence, his eyes showing the whites to an alarming degree, and now greeted them with quivering nostrils and sensitive ears. Jethro suddenly thought of Billy's recent actions and wondered what new exhibition of crankiness the hitherto meek and gentle horse contemplated. He was on the point of springing forward to grasp the bridle in time to prevent another display of temper, when Billy suddenly dropped his ears, half closed his eyes, and drew a long sigh of content. He was as meek and gentle as the Billy of old.

"Now you get in while I hold Billy," Jethro said.

"Was that Billy sighing?" the girl asked, standing stock still. "It was such a heart-felt sigh that it made me think of the donkey we had up at the Home. He was always sighing, and Mr. Wilson—he's the superintendent, you know, and he gave me to you—one day said donkeys always sighed because they couldn't cry. Is that why Billy sighs?"

"I dunno," Jethro replied with a grin. "Ask him."

"Billy's a horse, isn't he? Of course he is; I'd know by—by his smell."

Jethro's grin turned into a chuckle.

"'Ain't you ever seen a horse before?"

The girl shook her head sadly, and almost whispered, "No."

"Well," returned Jethro with a snort of sympathy, "I'd always heard them motor cars was crowding the horses out of the city, but I didn't suppose it was so bad as all that. Never seen a horse before? Well, I swan!"

Jethro was unhitching Billy, and as he turned to look at the girl, he saw that she was standing where he had left her, gazing wonderingly at him. There was a pathetic droop to the little face, and it occurred to Jethro that she must be very tired.

"Ain't you going to get in?" he asked kindly. "It won't take long to get home. Let me see," scratching his head thoughtfully, "what'd they say your name was? I've clean forgot."

"Polly," was the prompt response. "Some of the girls called me 'Polly Ann,' but that isn't my name—just plain Polly. Do you like it, or does it make you think of 'Polly-want-a-cracker'? That's what Maggie always said, and she thought it teased me, but it didn't. If *you* want to call me Polly Ann, you can. I won't mind," she added confidentially.

"No, I think I like Polly better. Now, Polly, won't you get in the wagon? Billy's impatient to get home to his oats."

Polly stretched forth a hand and grasped his arm.

"You're going to help me in, aren't you?" she said with a bright, appealing smile. "I might fall if I tried it alone."

Jethro thought she was somewhat clumsy in mounting to the high seat, but then he remembered that she was a city girl from the orphan asylum, and she had perhaps never before ridden in any kind of a vehicle except a street or motor car. He helped her up with the greatest care and tucked the blanket carefully around the long black-stockinged legs.

"Thank you very much," said Polly in her little old-fashioned way.

Jethro nodded and turned to finish unhitching Billy from the post. They started down the road at a steady trot, for Billy was in expectation of soon finding his oats. The bees droned and hummed from every hedge and orchard and the birds were singing among the trees as they rode along. The

countryside was abloom with apple blossoms and honeysuckle and the air was sweet with the perfume of wild flowers. Polly tilted her head, drawing great breaths.

"That honeysuckle makes me think of the Home," she remarked after a long silence. "It used to climb up to my window every spring, and I thought it was the sweetest thing I ever smelt. But now I think I like the apple blossoms better. Don't you? It isn't such a sickish sweet smell as the honeysuckle. I think when I'm married I'll have a bower of apple blossoms to stand under."

Jethro frowned for the first time, but a moment later he chuckled softly.

"You're pretty young to think about marrying, ain't you?" he asked with a little reproof in his voice.

"Yes," was the cheerful reply, "but of course it doesn't do any harm to think about it. It's better to think about a thing and be prepared for it when it does happen

than to wait and then lose your head when it does come. That's what Mrs. Wilson always said, and so I've been thinking about all sorts of things—marriage, death, sickness, and many other things. When they come, I won't be surprised. I'll know just how to act and what to do."

Jethro, unable to express his emotions in words, touched Billy with the whip, and then jerked him sharply back when he kicked and plunged forward. Jethro now had sufficient excuse to reprimand some one.

"Whoa now, Billy! What in tarnation's the matter with you to-day?"

Polly, clutching the side of the seat with one hand and Jethro's arm with the other, waited speechlessly until Billy had settled into a trot again. Then she became talkative once more, picking up the thread of her discourse just where she had left it.

"I was thinking of you on the train," she said, "and all the way out I was preparing myself to be ready for anything.

I wasn't sure, you see, that you would like me. But I'd know right away by your voice. I know voices so well. Once Mr. Wilson tried to deceive me by changing his. He was playing Santa Claus, and was all dressed up in a fuzzy wig and false face, and the children were frightened and said it must be the real Santa Claus. I did, too, until he spoke. Then I knew it was Mr. Wilson."

Jethro turned toward her, and remarked with a smile:

"You must be pretty smart, Polly. I wonder now if you've been thinking a lot about Miranda, and feel all prepared to act right when you meet her."

Polly grasped his arm with sudden energy.

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Baldwin?" she exclaimed. "Yes, I've been trying to—to think of her, and be—be prepared. But I can't somehow feel that I'm ready. Suppose she doesn't like me? Then I'd have

to go back, and I think that would break my heart. I could have stood it before I met you. If you'd said, 'Is that the girl I ordered? Well, I don't want her! She isn't what I wanted,' I'd been prepared, and gone back without a tear. Yes, I *was* prepared for that."

"Well, I didn't say it, Polly, so I suppose it's all right," Jethro answered, looking into the bright little face. "No, I didn't say anything like that, because I knew you was just the girl I'd ordered."

Polly squeezed his arm and turned a grateful face toward him. Then to Jethro's surprise and confusion, she raised his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"No, you didn't say that," she agreed, "but suppose Mrs. Baldwin says it?"

There was a whole tragedy in the tense, white face held so close to Jethro's. He looked into it silently for a moment; then he flecked the whip over Billy's back, and said in a husky voice:

"Leave that to me. I know Miranda. I've lived with her forty-odd years, and I ought to know her."

He laughed softly and reminiscently, and more to himself than to the girl at his side, he murmured:

"Yes, I ought to know her, if I'm ever going to."

Polly took this as a cheerful settlement of her forthcoming ordeal, and with a contented sigh she shifted her seat to snuggle closer to him until her little warm body made a burning spot on his leg.

CHAPTER TWO

THE noise of Polly's arrival at the farm was the signal for Miranda Baldwin to drop her dishes and hurry to the door, holding a lamp in one hand and using the other to shade her eyes, for it was dark before Billy and his load reached the farmhouse, and the shadows were intensified by the towering shade-trees along the gravel drive. At first, only the rattle of the wheels could be heard; then the white star on Billy's forehead, nodding and bobbing like a signal, appeared out the gloom; and soon the two occupants of the wagon, with Polly still snuggling close to Jethro, came within the circle of light.

Miranda stepped back into the house and placed the lamp on a table drawn near the window, so that the rays would shine di-

rectly on the drive. Jethro noted the action with a smile; he had seen her do it a hundred times before when he returned late, and he hoped to live to see her repeat it many times more in the future. When she returned to the doorway again, he awaited her greeting, for with that, too, he was familiar.

"That you, Jethro?" she called.

"Yep, Miranda!"

There was a pause. Jethro was smiling through the darkness. He had no intention of helping his wife in her awkward position.

"Did she come?" asked Miranda finally, although the question was superfluous as the light inside made Polly's face very clear.

"Why, can't you see her, Miranda?" was Jethro's answer. "Or 'ain't you got your specs on?"

"I can see well enough," snapped Miranda, which caused Jethro to chuckle. Then, plainly irritated, she added :

"What kind of a girl is she?"

"A pretty good sort, Miranda—blue eyes, red hair——"

"No, not red, but golden," interrupted Polly, "a rich golden tint like the rainbow's arch."

"Of course," he replied jovially. "I meant that, but in the sun it must have deceived me. Now I remember it was the sun I was looking at when I saw red, and not——"

"Jethro Baldwin, why don't you get out and stop that nonsense?" interrupted his wife. "The girl—Jennie, I believe——"

"No, ma'am, Polly," explained the child. "Jennie was the other girl. She went West and I went East. West and East we called each other before we parted."

Miranda had come out to the side of the wagon and was peering up at the little face. She was surprised at developments, but she didn't want to betray that anything ever astonished her.

"The letter said your name was Jennie, I thought," she observed placidly. "However, a name doesn't mean anything. You ought to know your own name."

"Yes, Mrs. Baldwin, I'm really and truly Polly, and that's been my name since I was a weeny, tiny bit of a thing. Don't you like it? If you don't, you may call me Polly Ann. I'm called that sometimes, but it really isn't my name."

Miranda Baldwin searched frantically for her spectacles in order to see better what sort of a girl was talking so strangely and familiarly to her. She finally discovered them on the top of her head, and pulled them down, and adjusted them to the bridge of her nose. With her eyesight thus reinforced by artificial means, she stared long and hard at the figure perched so securely on the high seat. Jethro had already descended, and was trying to muffle his laughter in Billy's thick mane.

"Suppose you get down and come into

the house and never mind the name," she said to the girl after a fairly long survey.

"Yes, ma'am, I'd like to very much. It's very kind of you to ask me."

She sat perfectly still on the high seat, however, and Mrs. Baldwin asked testily:

"Well, why don't you get down?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Polly, "I thought you knew. I'm afraid I might fall. I'm not familiar with this place yet, and I must be nearly ten feet high from the ground; but I'll soon get used to it."

"Jethro, help her down," commanded Miranda, turning to her husband.

But Jethro was there without waiting for the command. He reached up with both arms, and swung the light burden to the ground. As the little face swept past his, something soft and light touched him on the cheek. It was hardly a kiss, a mere caress of a pair of moist lips, but in the darkness Jethro was blushing as if he had

been caught in the act of kissing a young lady surreptitiously in the very presence of his wife.

"Thank you," was all Polly said to him.

Then reaching out she caught Miranda's dress, and finally clasped one of her hands between her tiny fingers.

"Now I'm ready to go in with you, Mrs. Baldwin," she said. "Will you let me hold your hand?"

Miranda started at this request, and half jerked her hand away for an answer; then as there was nothing else to do, she permitted Polly to cling to it while she led the way up the walk to the door majestically. All the way she felt the strange, pleasant warmth of the tiny fingers clasping her long bony ones. She had never had a child of her own; she had thought that she never wanted one; and she had never felt the thrill of a little hand resting trustingly and confidingly in one of hers before. When they reached the kitchen, she sought

to disengage the hand quietly, but Polly clung to it still.

"Everything is so strange at first," she said. "It's like going into a great dark dungeon. I can almost smell the dampness and mustiness of the prisoners' cells. I could almost shudder, if I didn't know you were with me, Mrs. Baldwin."

"There's no dampness or mustiness in my house," retorted Miranda promptly, showing her resentment of such an imputation by jerking her hand free.

Polly reached out for a chair, and sat down.

"I was just imagining that, Mrs. Baldwin," she assured her. "I know everything is clean and sweet. I can tell it by the odor." Sniff! Sniff! "You're cooking crullers, Mrs. Baldwin; aren't you? Oh, don't tell me. It's so much pleasanter to find out things yourself. Yes, I know it's crullers, and—and the fat's burning. I smell it."

A flush of annoyance reddened Miranda's face, for there was an unmistakable odor of burning fat in the kitchen. As she took considerable pride in her housewifely order and neatness, this little accident in her newcomer's presence upset her so much that she jerked the frying-pan hastily from the stove and precipitated some of the grease into the fire. There was a sizzle and a flare, and the kitchen became filled with smoke.

At that moment Jethro poked his nose in the door, and added to his wife's irritation.

"I reckon the house must be afire," he remarked, gasping and coughing. "What you doing, Miranda? Burning up them crullers?"

"You just wash up and get ready for supper, and don't interfere with my work," tartly replied the flustered woman.

"I just love the smell of burning grease," commented Polly, folding her hands on her

lap, "especially when it's flavored with crullers. They always burn some at the Home when they cook crullers, and whenever I smell it I think of them."

"Fond of crullers, be you?" asked Jethro.

"Fond of them? Oh, Mr. Baldwin, I just dote on them! If I ever have a home of my own, I'll cook crullers morning, noon, and night. I think they make the hair curl, don't you? Maybe that's why my hair curls all crinky and fluffy like. Do you like curly hair, Mrs. Baldwin?"

Miranda, leaning over the stove with hot, flushed face, paused in her work long enough to shoot a half-angry glance at the little questioner perched comfortably in the chair near the table. The sight of the girl taking her ease while she toiled diligently over the hot stove must have stirred resentment in Miranda's heart, for she answered bitingly:

"Curly hair or straight hair don't make

much difference to me. I like to see girls that can help and not just sit and talk like a parrot when other folks are having their troubles."

Polly stiffened her little body, and looked appealingly toward Jethro. Used to his wife's sudden spells of irritation and hasty words, Jethro winked back and made a grimace to reassure the child, but this did not relieve the little face of its pained, frightened expression. If anything, the pain deepened until it touched the blue eyes, which clouded and grew bewildered.

But Polly was, as she would say, prepared for anything. Back in her mind she had thought out just such a situation as this, and she soon brought it forth from its proper pigeonhole. Her face brightened, and she drew a deep breath of relief.

"Yes, I know just how you feel, Mrs. Baldwin," she said. "Some people would rather talk than eat. I heard Mrs. Wilson say that, and it's true, and she said that

they always provoked her to anger. I think they would me, too. Righteous anger, you know, is good for you. I heard the minister who visited the Home every Sunday preach a sermon on that text. Righteous anger, he said,—or maybe it was righteous indignation,—was good for Christians, and if they didn't have any of it, they were not worth much. I quite agree with him. Don't you, Mrs. Baldwin?"

Miranda didn't reply. She smothered a snort instead, and jerked the frying-pan from the stove, spilling more of the drippings on the spotlessly clean floor. This mishap naturally increased her anger.

"I will soon learn to fry crullers, Mrs. Baldwin," Polly continued, unabashed; "and when I do, you can sit down and talk, while I do the work. It won't take me long to get used to the place. Mr. Wilson said I picked up things very rapidly—remarkably, I think was the word he used. Well, I'll begin now to get my bearings.

That's what the sailors call it. I'll count the steps now."

She rose from her chair, removed her hat, placed one foot against the side of the room, and began pacing slowly toward the opposite side.

"One, two, three, four," she counted.

At the fourth step she ran into Jethro, who stood in the middle of the kitchen.

"Oh, I'll have to begin all over again," she said. "I didn't know you were there. Now please don't get in the way again. One, two, three, four, five," she counted slowly with each pace. "Six paces," she added, as she came straight against the opposite wall. "I'll never forget that. Now for the sink, one, two, three, four."

This time she collided with Miranda, who had stood perfectly still staring at the child. Jethro, too, was nonplussed and was stroking his chin beard nervously.

"I'll have to count that over, too," Polly exclaimed, "unless you can tell me how

many I counted. How many was it, Mrs. Baldwin, three or four? You see I must be sure. If I get it right first, I never forget it, but if I make it wrong once, it's hard to forget that too. Isn't it strange how hard it is to get rid of a mistake? One room in the Home is four paces wide, but I counted wrong the first time, and I was always getting mixed up. I'd run plump into the wall on the fourth count because I thought it was five across."

"Land's sake!" exploded Miranda, no longer able to contain herself. "What's the matter with the child? Is she crazy, Jethro?"

"I guess it's a kind of game they play at the asylum," weakly replied Jethro.

"Why, no, it isn't a game," was Polly's quick, surprised answer. "It's the way we get our bearings, as the sailors say. When I once know a room I can find my way around in it just as well as if I could see. Let me show you."

Miranda and Jethro exchanged wondering looks. Their surprise was becoming too much for them. Miranda suddenly started, and grasped Polly by the shoulder.

"What are you trying to do?" she demanded. "If you open your eyes you don't have to count your steps to get your bearings. We're not playing any blind-man's-buff. Now just get your things off, and we'll have supper."

Instead of obeying Polly stood still and looked helplessly at the speaker. Once more she was confronted by a situation that she had never quite thought out.

"Do you hear?" snapped Miranda, determined now to end all such nonsense. "Get your things off."

"Yes, ma'am," Polly replied, still bewildered.

"And hang them on that nail back of the door."

"Yes, ma'am. But where is the door? I'm all bewildered. You see, I haven't got

my bearings yet. If you'll show me once, I'll always remember. I never forget, Mrs. Baldwin."

"Here, Polly, here's the door," called Jethro.

The girl extended a hand in a wide sweep until it touched Jethro's. She clutched it and clung to it until the door was reached.

"Thank you, Mr. Baldwin," she said. "I know where it is now."

Miranda watched them in silence. Suddenly she strode forward, caught Polly, and whirled her around.

"What's the meaning of this?" she cried. "Can't you see with both eyes open?"

Polly looked up in surprise.

"No, Mrs. Baldwin," she said simply. "I've been blind ever since I was a little baby. I thought you knew."

"Blind!" ejaculated Miranda, raising both hands.

"Yes, ma'am. I used to think it was terrible, but I'm getting used to it. I really don't mind it so much now. Mr. Wilson used to say that if we had ears that could hear, noses that could smell, and hands that could feel, we ought to be thankful. And I am, Mrs. Baldwin—very thankful. Wouldn't it be terrible not to have ears to hear music, or a nose to smell sweet things? I believe I'd almost rather be dead, wouldn't you? Of course, not quite—just almost. And think of not having hands! Why, that would make you so helpless that somebody would have to feed you, unless you had artificial hands made for you, and they cost a lot of money —nearly ten dollars, I think. I knew a little boy who lost both arms, and he had artificial ones made for him, but he couldn't ever eat soup with them without spilling it. I think it must have been dreadful, don't you? Yes, Mrs. Baldwin, I thank the Lord every night that I'm only blind.

I think of how hard it would be if I didn't have any arms, or ears, or a nose, or a mouth to eat with. Oh, it makes me shudder to think of it!"

Miranda and Jethro listened to the voluble recital in silence and deepening bewilderment, staring so hard at Polly that she surely would have been confused if she had been able to see. Once Jethro cleared his throat, and used his red handkerchief freely, and Miranda unconsciously wiped her brow with the dish towel, and then dropped it untidily on the back of a chair.

"You can't see a thing?" blurted Miranda finally, scarcely able to comprehend the full significance of the confession.

"No, ma'am! But I can smell and taste and hear, and oh, I can walk and talk just like other people."

They had no doubt about the last faculty. Talk she could. Nature seemed to have compensated her in a way for the lack of

sight, for Polly had an extraordinarily ready and active tongue, backed up by a resourceful mind to furnish it with the material for talking. Certainly she had learned to make the most of this gift. All through the supper, which would have been a silent meal for Jethro and Miranda alone, Polly loosened her tongue and spread before her amazed hearers all the little imaginings and experiences of a ten-year-old girl whose life had been rich and varied in spite of the physical darkness surrounding her. Perhaps it was because she had such good listeners, or because she felt called upon to make a good impression the first night, that she monopolized the conversation, and astonished the two old people of her deep knowledge of many things that were strange to them.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Polly was tucked away for the night in her little bed—Jethro had led her to the room and Miranda had stayed to see that she didn't stumble over the wash-stand or fall down the stairs before she "got her bearings,"—the old couple returned to the kitchen, as the room furthest away from the one occupied by the orphan, and the safest, therefore, in which to hold the family consultation that was due after such a day of tremendous happenings. Jethro picked up his paper, and made a pretence at reading it to conceal his emotions. Miranda, more practical and not inclined to beat around the bush under any circumstances, plunged directly into the subject uppermost in both minds.

"A pretty trick them asylum people

played on us," she stormed. "They thought they could dump any chit of a child on us, and we'd never say booh."

Jethro cleared his throat behind his paper, but made no answer. His wife picked up her knitting, and continued:

"You can just write a letter, and tell them we're sending her back. Land o' goodness, a blind girl—stone blind!"

"It must be terrible, Miranda, to be blind," Jethro ventured to remark.

The knitting-needles clicked viciously.

"And you see that you put it pretty strong," she persisted. "Tell them what we think of such a trick. You better write the letter now. I'll tell you what to say if you're lost for words. I know what I'd write, if I was you."

Jethro dropped the paper and cleared his throat again.

"Maybe we'd better wait a few days," he suggested feebly. "It will upset Polly a good deal, I reckon, to be sent back."

"I reckon it will, but that's neither here nor there. She's got to go back, and the sooner the better. She'd be so in the way. I'd forever be worrying about her. A baby would be easier to care for."

"Polly's right smart, and I don't think she'd be in the way," said Jethro in defense of the absent. "You know, Miranda, she fooled us both until she confessed it. We didn't neither of us know she was blind until she began to count her steps to get her bearings. I call that right smart."

Jethro chuckled at the remembrance. He began to see things in a new light now—little actions of Polly that had puzzled him before: how she had refused to get in the wagon until he helped her; how she had clung to his hand and later to Miranda's; and how she had talked about knowing things by their smell. Poor girl, she had never seen things, and she had to recognize them by their odor or touch! Jethro became silent and absorbed in his reflections.

"I wonder, now," he remarked suddenly, rousing himself, "how she knew them apple blossoms from honeysuckle. I reckon it must have been by the smell."

Miranda withered him with a look.

"Wouldn't anybody know the difference by smelling?" she asked scornfully. "I don't call that very smart."

"Beats me how she knows so much," continued Jethro after a pause. "She can't read, but she knows a sight more'n most kids that do read. Them eyes of hers is blue and mighty ——"

Miranda had stopped her knitting and was lost in thought, but her stiff attitude was not encouraging to conversation, and Jethro left his sentence unfinished.

"What you thinking about, Miranda?" he asked after another painfully long pause.

"Jethro," she demanded, turning to him, "I wonder if she is blind."

"Why, she said so; I reckon it must be so."

"But her eyes are wide open, and they look just like any other eyes. She's just smart enough to pretend that, and think it a joke."

Jethro sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Well, I call that pretty bright, Miranda," he chuckled. "Here she's worked us all up pretending, and she ain't no more blind than you or me. Ha! Ha! What a pert little thing she is."

"I call it wilful deceiving," replied Miranda severely, "and I'd as soon keep a blind girl as one who'd lie to me the first night in the house. Jethro, get out your paper and pen."

"Why, Miranda, she didn't mean anything by it. It was just a little game of hers; she's forever playing games and talking like grown-ups. I wouldn't call that wilful deceiving. It was—it was ——"

"You write to the asylum people," interrupted his wife, "that they have made a mistake. Of course they did. The girl we

ordered was named Jennie, and this one's Polly."

"Maybe she is Jennie," Jethro suggested, "and she changed it to Polly on the train. Better wait till morning, and have another talk with her, Miranda."

"You write that letter to-night, Jethro, and it's time enough to talk to her afterwards."

Jethro obeyed reluctantly, but with the paper and pencil before him he was at a loss for words.

"What am I going to say, Miranda?"

"Tell them we didn't order a blind orphan, and ——"

"But we just concluded she wasn't blind, only pretending. They'd write back and tell us they hadn't sent a blind orphan to us."

"Then tell them we can't take any child that lies and deceives the first night she comes."

"I reckon that wouldn't be an excuse for sending her back. They can't guarantee every orphan against lying. I don't think

you could be sure of that with many little boys and girls that ain't orphans."

"Well, you write them," was the uncompromising reply.

"But what'll I write?"

"Tell them she don't suit, and they must send for her."

Jethro chewed the end of his pen-holder, and looked blankly at the paper. He was quiet for so long that his wife glanced at him inquiringly.

"Well, why don't you write that?" she queried.

"Miranda," he responded, "Polly's a bright little girl, and she's about as pretty as most children. I kinder took to her from the first. I reckon now if she wasn't blind, and she hadn't deceived us, you'd want to keep her. Wouldn't you?"

It was Miranda's turn to look a little confused and undecided. Finally she voiced a half grudging assent.

"Maybe I would if she was clean and

good-tempered and not getting into mischief."

"Well, then, Miranda, suppose we overlook this to-night and give her another trial. I'll tell her she mustn't try to pretend and make up things that ain't true, and ——"

"But I ain't sure she's pretending. Maybe she *is* blind."

Jethro had no answer to this, and he renewed his chewing of the pen-holder until he was in danger of swallowing the pieces his teeth had loosened. Feeling that she had the better of the argument, Miranda maintained a discreet silence.

"Well," said Jethro finally, "suppose we leave it till morning. I don't see no way we can settle it to-night. If she's only pretending she's blind, you can talk to her about the dangers and wickedness of lying, and if she is blind—why—why ——"

"We'll send her back! You can depend upon that, Jethro Baldwin."

"It would be too bad, and I guess it would nigh break her poor little heart."

"Well, it would break my health working and slaving for her."

"Don't think you'd have to work much for her, Miranda. She's able to take care of herself. I'll bet she could fry crullers, blind or no blind, in a week."

"Yes, and spatter the floor all over with grease."

"And when she once got her bearings she could wash dishes and wipe 'em."

"Huh!" snorted Miranda. "I wonder how many dishes would be left in a week. She'd break every one of 'em in a couple of days."

Jethro sighed, and rubbed his cheek where a soft pair of lips had touched it a few hours before. After all, Miranda was right. If Polly was blind, it would not be just to his wife to keep the poor little orphan. Miranda had worked hard all her life; she had been a faithful wife, and had

helped him to save for old age. Now that she was getting old and less able to stand the strain, it would be wrong to increase her burden.

They had decided to take a child from the city orphan asylum and give it a home, with the distinct understanding that it should be a girl who could help Miranda with some of her work. They had discussed the momentous problem for a year before they had reached a decision ; it was something that required careful thought and the weighing of pros and cons. Jethro secretly rejoiced in the idea of having a child in the house, for he loved children, and they generally reciprocated in kind ; but he had carefully refrained from presenting this side of the argument to his wife. He was adroit enough to agree with Miranda that she was getting too old to do all the housework, and that a good strong girl would lessen her burdens tremendously. Indeed, he had suggested it numerous times when

his wife seemed to have completely forgotten the subject, and by thus reminding her of her need and failing strength at every favorable opportunity, he had induced her to agree with him.

When they had finally made the decision and opened negotiations with the asylum authorities, Miranda had many a troubled moment of doubt and misgivings. To admit another into the home she had ruled with such splendid housewifely neatness, to give to a total stranger privileges which she had denied Jethro himself, privileges of washing and cleaning the dishes that were almost sacred to her and the fine linen that must be handled with tender care,—this step was almost like breaking down the gates of tradition and inviting the vandal in to demolish the household gods.

After having obtained her consent, Jethro had lost no time in making application at the asylum for a little girl. Miranda had

not consented or even thought of adopting a child; all she would yield on that point was her promise of a good home for some little waif of an orphan. But it had not been so easy even to board an orphan as they had supposed. The asylum authorities were not sending their little charges out indiscriminately. Jethro had been called upon to furnish credentials, and finally one of the officers of the institution had paid him a visit to see that he had a suitable home for a little girl. Apparently the visit had proved satisfactory, for they had sent word that a girl would be selected for them and sent out on trial. The letter contained a description of the orphan chosen for them.

Miranda now suddenly remembered the letter, and while Jethro sat there reflecting, she stole upstairs and returned with the letter in her hand. Jethro looked up as she reëntered the room and adjusted her spectacles on her nose.

" You going to write the letter, Miranda?" he asked good-naturedly.

His wife slowly deciphered the closely written pages of the letter, mumbling half audibly as she read. Jethro watched her with admiring eyes, for with all her " close " ways and sharp tongue he loved her.

" There it is, Jethro," she exclaimed finally. " It says her name is Jennie."

" Yes, we agreed that she must have changed her name to Polly coming out on the train."

" Well, that's the same as lying to us."

Once more she stumbled over the page until her eyes came to a phrase that caused her to stop. With one finger pointing to the line, she read aloud :

" She is about ten years old, tall, straight and healthy, with black hair and dark eyes."

She laid the letter down, moved her spectacles up to their favorite place on the top of her head, and commented :

"I reckon that will convince you there's been some mistake, Jethro Baldwin. Unless you think Polly changed the color of her hair and eyes on the train as well as her name, you must admit she ain't the girl we ordered."

Jethro was more mystified than his wife, and for the space of three minutes he stared with open eyes and mouth at his beloved partner.

"I guess you're right, Miranda," he admitted weakly. "There must have been a mistake. Polly ain't got black hair and eyes. She couldn't have deceived us on them points. Her eyes are as blue as that old chiny cup and saucer, and her hair's about the color of June butter. You sure it says black hair and dark eyes?"

"Read for yourself."

His wife shoved the letter across the table, and Jethro squinted long and hard at it. When he had read it through for the third time, he placed it on his knees, and grunted :

"I reckon it's too deep a puzzle for me to solve. Maybe Polly can enlighten us some in the morning."

"I guess you can finish writing that letter after all, Jethro. We won't wait for Polly to tell us any more lies. Now write them they have sent us the wrong child, and you want the one we ordered."

"But suppose the other one has a temper and is cross-eyed and full of mischief, Miranda," said Jethro persuasively. "We might get a worse one than Polly. I'll bet my hat we won't get a better one."

"We didn't get the girl we ordered," repeated his wife firmly, "and I ain't going to be cheated out of my rights. You write that letter, Jethro."

"You mean it, Miranda? You won't wait until morning?"

"You won't have time in the morning. It must be written to-night so you can mail it when you go to the village for the paper."

"All right, Miranda, if you say so."

And like a dutiful husband, but with many a pause and reluctant flourish of the pen, Jethro wrote the letter, reading each paragraph aloud as he finished it for his wife's approval, and finally signed his name in a small, cramped hand at the bottom of the page. Then he dropped the pen with a sigh, got up and walked to the open window. Outside the air was laden with the odor of honeysuckle and apple blossoms. Their scent suddenly recalled Polly's words about the honeysuckle and the apple blossoms as they were riding home that afternoon in the dusk. The memory of it made him feel so very tired and dreary that he sighed when he turned away from the open window.

Miranda looked up hastily.

"What's the matter, Jethro? You ailing again?"

"It's only a touch of the rheumatism, Miranda. It generally catches me at this time of the year."

"Well, you'd better take that medicine

Dr. Brown left. It's on the third shelf in the pantry near the sage tea. Take a big strong dose and head the rheumatism off."

"Oh, I guess it don't 'mount to much," pleaded Jethro. "I'll feel better in the morning."

The mere thought of the bitter dose suddenly cured him. He flung open the door, and went outside to sniff the fresh, spring air. When he returned, Miranda had forgotten all about the medicine and his rheumatism.

CHAPTER FOUR

POLLY woke very early the next morning listening to the birds singing and the chickens clucking as they wandered round in search of their early breakfast. But it was the chattering of a gray squirrel near her window that finally brought her out of bed with a start. At first she was a little startled and confused by her surroundings, but she quickly adjusted herself to her new environment, and made her way to the window by following the soft, fragrant breeze that blew through the window, and filled the room with the mingled odors of a thousand flowers.

"Oh, I must get my bearings quick!" she exclaimed. "I'll die of ecstasy if I don't. There," breathing deeply, "isn't that lovely perfumery! I think it's better

SHE MADE HER WAY TO THE WINDOW AND LEANED FAR OUT.
Page 59.

than a drug store at night-time. I'd love to bottle it up, and keep it so I could always smell it. Wouldn't it be lovely to smell like a scented lady forever and ever!"

She made her way to the window and leaned far out, swallowing the flower-scented air in great gulps. The squirrel, sitting on a branch of the nearest tree, watched her keenly; then concluding that there was nothing to fear, he renewed his scolding chatter.

"Oh, where are you?" cried Polly. "Come here and tell me what you're scolding about."

She began to chirp and chatter, too, imitating the squirrel so accurately that the little gray fellow stopped his conversation to study her more closely. Then as if drawn to her by some invisible bond, he edged nearer and nearer, until Polly felt his cold nose poking against her fingers in a vain search for food. Delighted by his confidence, she talked to him in a soft, cooing

voice that the squirrel seemed to understand.

She was in this attitude, leaning out of the window, and holding her fingers for the squirrel to nose, when Jethro happened to pass beneath on his way from the barn to the house. He stopped, and looked up at the apparition in surprise and apprehension.

"Look out, Polly, that you don't fall out there!" he cautioned.

"Oh, Mr. Baldwin, isn't it a glorious morning! The flowers are losing all their perfume, and I'm drinking it in. Do you think they'll have enough to last all day? Wouldn't it be a shame if I stole it all, and they hadn't any more for anybody else!"

Jethro laughed happily.

"I reckon they got enough for everybody," he replied. "How'd you sleep last night, Polly?"

"I slept in paradise, Mr. Baldwin, and I woke up dreaming I was in a bower of

roses and orange blossoms. I didn't think it could be me at first, but some other little girl. How'd you sleep, Mr. Baldwin?"

"Not very well, Polly. I had bad dreams."

He did not say that she was responsible for his restlessness, and Polly was unaware of having obtruded her personality upon his slumbers.

"It must have been the crullers you ate last night," she said promptly. "Mrs. Wilson always said too many crullers would cause bad dreams. I guess that's why she'd never give us more than one. But I ate two last night, and I had the loveliest of dreams. Maybe if I'd had three, they would have been bad dreams. Did you eat three, Mr. Baldwin?"

"Why, I dunno, Polly. I don't think I counted 'em. Perhaps I did—yes, I reckon I must have eaten three."

"And Mrs. Baldwin, did she eat three, and have bad dreams?"

"Miranda? Why, bless me, no, Miranda never ate three crullers at once in her life. She's particular, Miranda is, of what she eats."

"She must be a very—very *exemplary* lady, Mr. Baldwin," replied Polly gravely. "I think we ought to take her as an example."

"Yes, I guess we should," replied Jethro, stifling his burst of merriment, just as the subject of their conversation emerged from the kitchen door.

"Jethro!" she called.

"Yes, Miranda, I'm coming!"

"Who you talking to out there all alone?"

Polly didn't give him time to answer.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Baldwin," she cried. "Isn't it a beautiful morning? I hope you slept well."

Miranda looked up and saw the girl leaning over the window-sill, with the gray squirrel nibbling impishly at her finger

tips and a climbing rosebush making a frame of rare beauty for her golden hair and blue eyes. Miranda experienced an indefinable sensation. Polly certainly was good to look at, and her fresh, young face was wreathed in smiles.

"I slept quite well, thank you," Miranda replied after a pause. Then turning to her husband she said, "Jethro, you go and help her down. Breakfast is nearly ready."

"Oh, no, I'm coming down alone," Polly remonstrated. "I've got my bearings now. I know the stairs, and I'll show you how I can walk without any help. I counted every step last night."

She darted away from the window, and a few minutes later they heard her on the stairs. Miranda looked at Jethro, and Jethro looked at Miranda. The same thought was uppermost in each mind, "Now we shall see whether she is really blind."

Polly pushed open the door and appeared in the kitchen, radiant with happiness.

"There, didn't I tell you?" she cried in glee. "I found the way, and I won't have to be helped again. Aren't you glad, Mr. Baldwin, you won't have to show me upstairs to bed again? I'm sure you are. Now I must learn to walk around here without being helped. One, two, three," she counted.

"Jethro, help her to a chair," commanded Miranda, "and I'll put the breakfast on. It's getting late."

Jethro obeyed, and Polly dropped into an easy chair drawn up before the table. They were eating in the dining-room instead of in the kitchen, and Polly at once began taking note of the difference. A small, slender hand wandered ever so lightly over the chairs and table, but so sensitive were its finger tips to impressions that each touch made a lasting impression upon Polly's mind. Miranda brought in steaming hot

coffee, fresh biscuits, and fried ham and bacon. Polly scented this new, appetizing odor instantly.

"What a splendid housekeeper you are, Mrs. Baldwin," she observed. "I can almost feel that everything is clean and neat. I feel very strongly, you know; it's because I can't see. Mr. Wilson said that when one organ is lost, all the others come to its rescue. It's just like when somebody is sick or in trouble, everybody runs to help him. I can hear, too, so wonderfully well that you'd be surprised. Can you hear your watch ticking, Mr. Baldwin? I can, and the clock in the next room. It's the kitchen clock, isn't it?"

"Yes, Polly, I reckon it is," replied Jethro. "But are you sure you hear my watch ticking? Let me see now, I'll try you."

He removed the watch from his pocket and put it in his coat hanging from the door rack.

"Now do you hear it?" he asked.

"Yes, but it isn't on you. It's over there. Wait, let me find it."

She rose hastily from the table, and walked carefully toward the door, using feet and hands to feel her way. Guided by the ticking of the watch, she finally grasped the coat with a little exultant cry.

"You put it in your coat, Mr. Baldwin. Here it is."

"Can you bring it to me?" Jethro asked.

"Yes, if you don't move. I can hear you breathing. Now, one, two, three."

She took a few wrong steps, but quickly corrected herself, and finally caught Jethro by the arm.

"Now didn't I do that well?" she laughed.

"You certainly did, Polly. Sure you weren't peeking a little out of one corner of your eye?"

"Peeking? What do you mean, Mr. Baldwin? Oh, you mean could I see just a

little? No, Mr. Baldwin, I can't see even a tiny little bit."

"You say you've been blind since you were a baby?" Miranda asked, showing increasing interest in the girl.

"Yes, Mrs. Baldwin, ever since my dear mother died, and that was when I was born. I never saw her. Isn't that terrible! I think if I could have just gazed up into her face once, I'd never felt badly about being blind. It must have been a heavenly face, don't you think so? They say mothers' faces are just heavenly when they look at their first baby. I wonder what a heavenly face looks like. Do you know, Mrs. Baldwin?"

Miranda nearly choked in her surprise, but made no effort to answer this question. She poured the coffee in silence, and then only remarked:

"It's getting late now. Suppose we go on with breakfast."

Polly had a voracious appetite. Every-

thing tasted good to her, and she exclaimed many times that the coffee was delicious, that the eggs were so fresh they melted in the mouth, and that the biscuits were so much better than asylum biscuits. Miranda felt a glow of pride at the compliments heaped upon her cooking. She showed less sternness, and once or twice Jethro caught her staring hard at the little stranger. Once she waved her hand so close to Polly that it almost touched the girl's face, but if Miranda intended to test the truthfulness of Polly's statements in this way, she obtained no better results than a confirmation of the child's veracity. Polly never flinched, nor winked an eyelash.

Jethro and Miranda exchanged meaning glances. The girl was certainly blind, although it was hard to believe it when they looked into her eyes. They were large, beautiful eyes, as blue as Miranda's "old blue chiny cups and saucers," with no hint of blindness except in their far-away,

dreamy stare. They seemed to be gazing through her questioners, penetrating beneath the surface and reading their inward thoughts.

Now that she was face to face with the subject of last night's conversation, Miranda studied Polly more attentively, and a certain amount of awe, tempered by pity, gradually arose in the woman's heart, and made her more charitable. It was hard for her to quite realize the situation; once or twice she caught herself unconsciously signaling in code to Jethro, and blushed when she remembered that there was no need of such clandestine actions. Polly could not see her darkest scowl, her most frantic gesture, nor her smile, whenever she permitted one to appear.

But Miranda soon learned that her voice carried subtle messages to the girl. Polly's ear was attuned to all sounds; the slightest whisper or unusual intonation affected her, as the vibrant string of a violin affects a

musician. Even an unconscious sigh, a deep breath, or the movement of a hand across the table-cloth caught her attention. She had lived in a world of sounds long enough to distinguish between them, and her alert mind interpreted their meaning with wonderful accuracy. She was a sensitized plate that photographed sound instead of light rays.

When the breakfast was over—and it was an unusually long meal for Jethro and Miranda, just as the supper had been the night before—Miranda rose abruptly from her chair, and began bustling round to remove the dishes. There was a long morning's work ahead, and the day was gaining on her.

Jethro pushed back his chair also, for the day's work called him to the garden and fields. Polly rose timidly, and began feeling her way cautiously around the table. They watched her in silence, fascinated by this new phenomenon that

had suddenly appeared in their home. She reached the end of the table, and stood in a listening attitude.

"Oh, yes," she cried, nodding her head, "I know the kitchen now by the teakettle. Isn't it a pleasant noise, Mrs. Baldwin? A humming teakettle sounds so homelike. And I know the sink. I hear the water dripping."

Swiftly and skilfully she made her way to the sink, guided by the water dripping from a leaky faucet.

"Jethro, I asked you to put a new washer in that faucet three days ago," said Miranda severely, feeling that she had been caught in another piece of housewifely slackness.

Jethro chuckled.

"Good thing I didn't, Miranda," he returned. "Polly wouldn't had anything to guide her to the sink, if I'd fixed it."

Polly could not see the look Miranda gave her husband in reply to this remark.

Totally unconscious of any antagonism between them, she called :

" Now I can wash the dishes, Mrs. Baldwin. If you'll bring them to the sink, I can do it 'most as quickly as any one."

" Land sakes, Polly, you can't wash the dishes if you can't see," objected Miranda. " You'd break every one of them before you got through."

Polly looked hurt for an instant, but the cloud on her sensitive face cleared quickly. She had thought out this situation beforehand, and so was equal to it.

" I used to wash them for Mrs. Wilson," she explained, " and I never broke a thing. She said I was the best little dish-washer she'd ever had. You see, I can feel if they're clean. Some dirt, you know, is so small you can't see it, but you can feel it. Let me try it, Mrs. Baldwin."

Miranda still hesitated. Finally she grudgingly placed in the outstretched hand the cheapest and commonest piece of china.

Polly seized it and carried it to the sink, and after washing it carefully and dexterously, she placed it on the drip board to wait for its turn with the towel. Miranda let her have another plate. Jethro performed the unusual task of helping his wife with the dishes, carrying them to the sink and handing them to Polly one at a time, just to see her small, white, dexterous hands twirl them round in the water, and cleanse them as neatly as if she had been gifted with a dozen pairs of eyes.

"Well, I swan!" he exclaimed finally. "You do beat all, Polly. How you do it puzzles me."

Miranda picked up each dish and scrutinized it closely for signs of dirt, but she had to acknowledge that each one was flawlessly clean.

"I just love dish-washing, don't you, Mrs. Baldwin?" Polly rattled on as she washed. "The water feels so soft and clean to the hands. I just imagine it's some

brook trickling over my fingers, and these plates and saucers are little gold-fishes I'm washing. I don't suppose fishes need washing, for they're in the water all the time. They must be awfully clean, don't you think so? Once we had a gold-fish in an aquarium at the Home. It was beautiful, they all said. I did want to look at it just once, but of course I couldn't. Then I thought if I could feel it, touch it just once, I'd know it better than any of them.

"One day I did touch it, too, Mrs. Baldwin. I was alone in the room, and I simply had to touch the dear little thing. I couldn't resist the temptation. You know sometimes temptation does get so strong that you can't resist it. Our minister at the Home said yielding to temptation once in a great while wouldn't really make one very bad. He thought everybody would be a sinner, if one single yielding made him so. I quite agree with him. Don't you?

"Well, one day I touched this gold-fish

with my fingers—a tiny touch that didn't hurt him—and oh, it seemed as if I'd touched something wonderfully beautiful. I could almost feel the gold with my fingers. I never knew what gold looked like before, but I knew then because I'd felt it. You know, Mrs. Baldwin, blind people see by touch, and that's 'most as good as seeing with the eyes."

Miranda, wiping and polishing the dishes as fast as Polly washed them, listened to the girl's chatter with varying emotions. Jethro found it difficult to tear himself away from the kitchen; twice he started up with the remark, "Well, I reckon I must be going," but some new outburst of Polly's detained him. Finally he did get as far as the door, and said conclusively:

"I guess I'm pretty late. I'll go down and get the mail, Miranda."

Miranda did not reply, but continued to wipe the dishes. A few minutes later she went to the back door, and seeing her

husband puttering round the barn, she called to him :

" Jethro, never mind the mail this morning. I want you to help me take down the parlor stove. I asked you to take it down last week. I can't clean in there until it's out of the way."

" All right, Miranda, I reckon I'd better help you to-day. I'll be pretty busy in the field next week."

CHAPTER FIVE

JETHRO labored indoors a good part of that day, first wrestling with the parlor stove, which had to be taken down, greased, and stored in a safe place until needed the following winter. After he had finished this task, he found it necessary to restore a sagging closet door to its original position, and to shave off the edge of another door to keep it from sticking. All these little jobs kept him in the house within sight and hearing of Polly.

By afternoon Polly had got her bearings so well that she could move from room to room with the precision and swiftness of a person gifted with two good eyes. She knew the location of every article and piece of furniture in each room, and had counted the steps from every corner of each

room to every other corner and side. Her slender, intelligent hands had moved from door-jamb to window, and from the side-board to the china closet; she could tell by touch exactly in what part of the house or room she stood at any particular moment. Her memory for such things was an inborn faculty, developed by habit and practice.

Late in the afternoon she walked to the door and breathed deeply of the soft air. The porch was embowered in roses and honeysuckles. She reached up and touched a blossom to her cheek with childish glee.

"Now I'm going to explore new and strange countries," she remarked. "I must get my bearings outdoors."

Jethro sprang to her side.

"Let me show you the way, Polly," he said, taking her hand.

Miranda watched them with a little pang of jealousy, as they wandered afield, hand in hand. Jethro was showing Polly the apple orchard, the barn, and the garden.

Slowly, step by step, they proceeded, Polly counting and memorizing landmarks that would serve as her guide in the future.

"This is the half-way beacon, Mr. Baldwin," she exclaimed once when they stopped under a big elm tree. "Twenty paces from the porch to the tree, and twenty to the barn. I'll remember that."

Miranda was strangely neglectful of her afternoon's work. She stood by the kitchen window watching them. Polly was now picking daisies along the border path, and weaving them into her hair. Then Jethro plucked a rose and handed it to her; she kissed it, and after burying her nose in its perfumed center, she placed it in her dress.

Half an hour later Jethro returned alone, walking into the kitchen unexpectedly. Miranda looked up apprehensively.

"Where's Polly?" she asked quickly.

"Playing out there with the birds and squirrels. I declare she makes friends with everything. Billy just danced with joy

when he saw her, and nearly climbed out of the stall to let her rub his nose. Then she whistled to the robins, and one of 'em tried to light on her shoulder. I reckon he would have, if I hadn't been there."

"Maybe they know she's blind and can't hurt them," was Miranda's practical reply.

"Where'd I leave my coat?" Jethro asked. "I plumb forgot I was in my shirt-sleeves."

"I have enough to do without looking after your coat," his wife retorted. "I suppose it's where you left it last."

"Then it must be on the porch railing. I'll get it and take Polly down to the lower garden."

In a few minutes Jethro came into the kitchen again, carrying his coat on his arm. He was rummaging through the pockets with one hand, and showing great concern. The search continued for some time in silence.

"Well, I swan!" he exclaimed. "Where'd

that letter get to? I must have dropped it out."

"What letter?" Miranda asked quietly.

"Why—the one I was going to mail to-day, the one to the asylum people. Now that beats all where it's gone."

He returned to the porch and made an ineffectual search; then he looked through the parlor and dining-room. He was still searching his pockets when he entered the kitchen the third time.

"Where do you suppose I could have dropped it, Miranda?" he questioned anxiously.

"Don't bother me about such things this afternoon," testily replied his wife. "I can't spend my time hunting for your lost things. There's Polly now waiting for you. If you're going to take her to the lower garden, you'd better be off. It's getting late."

"All right. I'll hurry back. But it beats me where that letter got to."

Jethro left the house, still mumbling about the lost letter and feeling in his pockets. Miranda saw him take Polly by the hand, and watched the two of them disappear among the orchard trees. When they were far enough away to make a sudden return impossible, Miranda moved from the window to the stove. From the folds of her dress she drew a white envelope with Jethro's well-known scrawl defacing it. She looked at it for a moment, glanced about her suspiciously, and fully assured that she was alone in the kitchen, she raised the lid of the stove, and dropped the letter into the hot coals. When the paper flared, she replaced the stove lid, sighed audibly, and returned to her work as if nothing unusual had happened.

Jethro soon returned, leading Polly by the hand. She was carrying an armful of flowers, and her hair and neck were loaded with fragrant blossoms.

"Oh, Mrs. Baldwin," she cried, bursting

"Oh, Mrs. Baldwin, I've brought a rose for your hair!"
Page 82.

into the kitchen, "I've brought a lovely rose for your hair! Please let me put it in. I wonder if your hair is gray. I think it must be, and this rose is a beautiful red. It will look lovely in your hair. I almost wish I had gray hair, so I could look dignified and matronly. Do you suppose I'll ever look like that? Sometimes I'm afraid I won't, I'm so full of life and so thoughtless. Once I tried to be dignified and matronly in a play. I was supposed to be a dear old lady waiting to welcome her son home after he'd been away for a long, long time. I should have walked up to him slowly and stately, and said, 'Robert, my dear son, I'm so glad to welcome you home again.' That's what the play said. But Robert's real name was Timothy, and we called him Tinker, and when he said in a strange voice, 'Mother, I've come back,' I just forgot my dignity, and ran to him giggling. And what do you think I said? 'Tinker,' I said, 'don't kiss me, for you've

been stealing jam again. I smell it, and I know it's stuck all over your lips.'

"Of course, that broke up the play. They laughed, and said I'd spoilt it. I was sorry, and I knew I'd never be a dignified old lady. I am too harum-scarum. But I'd like to be a nice, dignified lady like you, Mrs. Baldwin—some day."

Polly was fastening the rose in Miranda's hair. Miranda bent her head so that Polly could reach the proper place. It was soft, wavy hair, and was streaked liberally with white. At one time it had been curly, and had formed a beautiful coronet for her head. Jethro could remember when he considered it the prettiest hair in the State, and the face peeping through the stray, rebellious strands the loveliest face in the whole world.

Polly fixed the rose to her satisfaction, and gave it a tiny pat with her slim hand.

"I think that must be very becoming to you, Mrs. Baldwin," she said. "I wish I could see it."

Possibly something in the tone of the voice affected Miranda, for she answered sympathetically :

" I wish you could, Polly."

Polly remained speechless and still for so long that Miranda looked at her inquiringly. The little face was very grave, and the eyes had that sad, far-away stare peculiar to the blind. The child was apparently lost in deep thought.

" What are you thinking of, Polly ? " Miranda asked finally, unable to endure the silence longer.

" I was thinking, Mrs. Baldwin," she responded quickly, " how good you and Uncle Jethro—oh, I forgot ! You don't know. Well, I'll tell you the secret; you know part of it, now. Listen ! "

Impulsively she caught Miranda's face in her two hands, and drew it near her lips. Then with her warm breath caressing Miranda's cheek, she whispered :

" I'm to call Mr. Baldwin Uncle Jethro.

He said I could. He liked the name, and I adore it. Uncle Jethro! Uncle Jethro! Isn't that lovely? It has a grand, beautiful sound. It's almost as good as if I could say, 'I see! I see!' Don't you think so, Mrs. Baldwin?"

Miranda's face twitched, and her usually firm voice shook a little.

"It does sound well, Polly."

"It will make us feel so friendly like. Of course, he isn't my real uncle, but I can imagine he is. I wonder what a real uncle feels like. I don't suppose you can tell me, can you, Mrs. Baldwin?"

Polly had a way of asking a question, and then either answering it herself, or not giving the one interrogated time to make a suitable reply. Just now she did not wait to find out whether Miranda could tell her what a real uncle felt like; and it is doubtful if the answer would have been satisfactory, anyway.

"And a real aunt," Polly continued, "I

wonder what she'd be like. I suppose some aunts are better than others. Did you ever have an aunt, Mrs. Baldwin?"

"Yes, dear, I had a good many of them."

"Oh, more than one! And did you like some better than others?"

"Perhaps I did. I don't seem to remember much about them. Yes, there was Aunt Lindy. I think she was my favorite, but she's been dead these many years."

"Isn't it too bad that aunts have to die! I think it would break my heart, if I had one, and she should die. Maybe it's just as well that I haven't any; then I can't break my heart by losing one."

"Polly, didn't you ever have an aunt or uncle?" queried Miranda suddenly.

"No, Mrs. Baldwin. I'm what they call a little waif. I suppose you know what that means. We had several at the asylum, but little waifs sometimes grow up and become somebody. Mrs. Wilson told me that,

and I'm going to try to be somebody, and not stay a waif forever and ever."

"I'm sure you won't, dear."

Polly sighed and clung to the hand she had been holding. At that minute Jethro passed the window, and seeing the attitude of the two, he walked away without interrupting.

"I suppose you have little nieces and nephews who call you aunt, haven't you, Mrs. Baldwin?" the little talker went on.

"No, Polly, I never had either. Nobody has ever called me Aunt Miranda."

"Oh, how lonely you must be! I thought all nice ladies were aunts. Wouldn't you like to be one?"

Miranda hesitated a moment. Then she smiled, and really dropped a tear.

"I think it would be nice to be called Aunt Miranda," she said, quietly.

Polly suddenly clapped her hands with joy.

"Then I'll call you that. You'll be *my*

Aunt Miranda. Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda! We'll be a cosy little family all by ourselves. I'll be your niece and you'll be my aunt and uncle. Do you know, Aunt Miranda, I believe I feel ten years younger this very minute? Do you feel younger, too? I wish I could see your face. Is it all gloriously radiant with happiness? That's what they say it is when one is very happy."

Suddenly she stopped and looked very serious.

"But maybe you're not happy at finding a niece," she faltered. "I was thinking only of myself. Uncle Jethro said he was happy, as happy as could be, to find a little niece, and I kissed him when he said it. Are you pleased to have a niece, Aunt Miranda?"

Miranda Baldwin unbent so far as to draw Polly close and whisper in her ear:

"Yes, dear, I'm very happy!"

Then Polly clasped her arms about Mi-

randa's neck, and bestowed the kiss of relationship on the withered cheek. It was such a hug and kiss as only an impulsive and loving child, longing for affection, could give. A tear trickled down the furrows of Miranda's cheek, and she could barely control her voice. She was glad when the child released her, and danced up and down, and with a final twirl exclaimed:

"I must go tell Uncle Jethro. He will be so pleased to know it. Uncle Jethro! Uncle Jethro!"

Miranda heard her voice dying away in an echo as the little blind girl made her way around the house. Then Miranda sat down, and stared hard at the stove. The stove had always been her chief comforter. For forty years, winter and summer, she had stood over it cooking and preparing the meals for Jethro, and one becomes intimately acquainted with even an inanimate object in such a long time.

Miranda Baldwin had known few joys in

life. For the most part she had sacrificed health and happiness to her little god of toil. Her few neighbors had never been taken into her personal confidences; her relatives were fewer than her neighbors and far less apt to awaken her sympathy and affection. It had been a lonely life on the farm. At first she had toiled to save something from their meagre income, and then when they had laid aside a considerable sum, she was so used to work that she could not relinquish it.

Jethro, being of a more easy-going and sociable disposition, could adapt himself to their changed condition much better than his wife. There was little danger of his killing himself with work, not because Jethro wasn't thrifty and willing to do his share of the farm work; but because he saw the uselessness of overworking when there was no actual necessity for it. In the planting and harvesting seasons he hired others to do the back-breaking work that

formerly had fallen to his share. He bought labor-saving implements and machinery, and had stored in his barn many hundred dollars' worth of up-to-date inventions for agricultural improvements.

But indoors Miranda clung to the old methods that had made her early life so hard and discouraging. If Jethro brought home a patent churn to save her strength, she would stubbornly shake her head, and put it aside for the old-fashioned article operated by hand. It was the same when he suggested attaching her sewing machine to his gasoline engine, or buying other labor-saving improvements for the household. No, Miranda would have none of these new "contraptions." She would do her work as she had always done it. She would not even consent to have a hired woman in the house except on special occasions.

So her life had been unnecessarily sacrificed on the altar of work. She had no

time to visit and gossip with her neighbors; she was a regular church attendant, but she rarely took part in any of the social organizations connected with the church; she was too tired after her week's work to go to town with Jethro to shop or to attend a show or other form of amusement. With the heroic martyrdom of the captain who goes down with his sinking ship, she clung to the farm, intending to die there.

Miranda was not of this generation, but of the past. Life was one long gray stretch of monotonous work. It was not strange that she had grown a little hard and stern; that her temper at times was irritable and her words short; it would have been more surprising if she had not grown sour and cranky under the circumstances.

This afternoon when Polly left her, Miranda sat looking at the stove for a long time, unconsciously reviewing a long life of bitter toil and deprivation. Perhaps it was the contrast between her life and Polly's

that first set her thinking, or perhaps it was the childish kiss that had broken the icy barrier of her reserve. Something had changed her. It was a warm day, but she snuggled close to the stove, as if chilled by the summer air. She drew her shawl tighter over her shoulders, and continued to stare at her oldest and most intimate friend—the stove.

CHAPTER SIX

POLLY became a permanent member of the Baldwin family, and the question of sending her back to the asylum was not raised again between Jethro and Miranda. Jethro continued to make ineffectual searches for the lost letter, but always quietly and surreptitiously. The fear of opening the old question with Miranda kept him in a state of trepidation. If the letter should turn up, it might remind his wife that the asylum people had cheated them out of their rights, and Miranda might insist upon his mailing the letter; but clearly a lost letter couldn't be mailed, and if not sent, no one would be the wiser. Often in the midst of a quiet conversation Jethro's thoughts would return to the lost article, and unconsciously he would begin rummaging in his coat pocket.

"What's the matter, Jethro?" asked Miranda one night, looking up sharply from her knitting.

"Why," stammered Jethro, who had worked his hand in under the torn lining of his coat, "I—I reckon there's a pin here sticking in me."

It was hard for him to deceive Miranda without getting red and flustered. He knew that there was no pin in the coat, but that something flat and crinkly like a letter had got lodged in between the lining and the coat, and the thought flashed over him that the solution to the puzzle was at hand. The letter he thought was lost had worked under the lining, and had thus defied all his efforts to find it.

"Take the coat off and let me see," commanded Miranda.

Jethro flushed, and told a lie.

"Never mind, Miranda. Here's the pin," holding up one he picked from the table.

"If the lining is torn, let me have the

coat, and I'll sew it up," calmly insisted his wife.

"I don't believe it's torn. I guess it's all right, Miranda. It was just a pin that I stuck in my coat."

"Well, let me have the coat and look at it."

Jethro knew that it was no use protesting further. The wild look of the cornered animal suddenly changed to shrewd craftiness. As he rose to remove the coat, he worked one hand frantically to extract the letter before handing the coat to Miranda. But Jethro was awkward by nature, and the letter was so securely caught in the lining that he could not easily loosen it. Perspiration broke out on his forehead, and his hands trembled.

"What's the matter with you, Jethro?" demanded his wife impatiently. "Hand me the coat without any more fuss."

To expedite matters she reached out a hand and jerked it from him. Jethro al-

most yielded to an overpowering desire to express his feelings by a strong word, but thought better of it and sat down helplessly to await the inevitable.

Miranda found the torn lining, and also the letter, which she calmly removed and handed to Jethro after a casual glance at it.

"I wouldn't be carrying them papers around loose in an old coat like this," she said.

Jethro looked at the papers, and burst into a roar of laughter to relieve his emotions. It wasn't the lost letter after all, but an envelope containing a few thin papers filled with crop statistics, which he suddenly remembered he had tucked in the old coat that morning.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," reproved his wife.

"No, Miranda, I suppose not, but I was wondering if them papers could have been a-sticking in me instead of the pin. Tom Baker said when he gave them to me this

morning to read them carefully, for the arguments were sharp as tacks. Maybe it was the tacks I felt."

Miranda continued her sewing unsmilingly, so Jethro subdued his mirth, and metaphorically patted himself on the back for his shrewdness in getting out of a bad scrape.

Meanwhile Polly was like an adventurous mariner, and the darkness which encompassed her physical senses was not deep nor black enough to blot out the beauties of the world around. No sooner had she got her bearings round the house and its immediate vicinity, than she felt obliged to extend her boundary of explorations to other lands. Like Columbus, she sailed without chart or compass, but like him, too, an intuitive sense of land beyond waiting to be discovered buoyed her up with hope and great expectations. She had her beacons and landmarks scattered all over the yard and barn; she could find the

chicken house by the smell of the syringa bush; she located the cow shed by the fence that started from the big elm-tree; and the barn itself was in a straight line from the house porch, forty paces away. The gravel walk passed the pig-pen on the right, and after twisting like a serpent through the garden, it terminated in the orchard beyond. Polly could follow the gravel walk as easily as if she could see.

But adventuring beyond these home boundaries became Polly's consuming desire. Each day she extended her explorations. Once she wandered afield in the lower meadow, and discovered a lark's nest in the grass. Another time she reached the wood-lot back of the house by following a snake fence, and then flushed with the excitement of her achievement, she sat down under the trees to enjoy the cool shade. Jethro, coming thither in anxious search, found her there two hours later.

"Why, Polly," he said, "I thought you'd

got lost. How'd you ever get way out here?"

"I followed the fence, Uncle Jethro," she replied. "I smelt the woods over here, and heard the trees whispering to each other. I wanted to listen to them."

"What be they saying, Polly?"

Jethro fanned himself with a battered straw hat, and took a comfortable seat by her side.

"I don't quite know, Uncle Jethro. I don't believe they want me to learn their secrets. I've been listening here for a long time, and they just swish and flicker, and make a noise like bees humming. I wonder if they think I'm eavesdropping. Maybe if I went away they'd like it better."

"I reckon they don't mind you, Polly. I'd stay, if I wanted to. I didn't know trees could talk before."

"Oh, yes, they can. I used to hear them talking at the Home. We had trees there, you know—a big elm and some poplars,

and a poor, forlorn little maple. I used to feel sorry for the maple-tree, it was so thin and scrawly, and when the wind blew it shivered as if it was cold. I guess it had a hard time of it, don't you, Uncle Jethro? All the worms and bugs would get on it, and eat off its leaves as fast as they uncurled. Mr. Wilson said it was too bad, but that was always the way in life. The under-dog had the worst of it, he said, for all the other dogs would pounce on him. I wonder what he meant. I guess he thought that the maple-tree was a dogwood-tree, but I knew it was just a dear little maple trying hard to grow big and strong."

Polly grew thoughtful, while Jethro lazily continued his fanning, and watched the shadows of the leaves playing on her face.

"Uncle Jethro," she asked, as if speaking her thoughts aloud, "who lives in that house over there?"

Jethro Baldwin drew a sharp breath, and quickly raised himself on his elbow.

"How'd you know there was a house over there?" he demanded in surprise.

"There's a little boy living in it," Polly continued, "isn't there?"

"How'd you know that?"

"Why, I hear him often,—sometimes he's crying, and sometimes he's very angry at something. He must live in the house, and he must be very sad or very wicked. Maybe he's lonesome, and wants some one to play with."

Uncle Jethro rose from his grassy seat, and cleared his throat.

"I guess we'd better go, Polly. I clean forgot to tell you Aunt Miranda sent me out to look for you. She'll be worried if we don't go right back."

Polly got up obediently, and took his hand, but her mind was on the little boy and the house somewhere in the distance.

"What kind of a little boy is he?" she persisted.

"Oh, just a boy," replied Jethro a little gruffly. "Most boys are all alike."

"But why is he cross and angry so much? Isn't he a good little boy?"

"I reckon not, Polly. He's spoilt. Some boys are that way, and they give a heap of trouble."

"Did his mamma spoil him?"

"Most likely she did. I wouldn't think of him, Polly. He won't never come over here to bother you."

Polly walked along thoughtfully by Jethro's side. She did not press her questions, but it was clear that she had not dismissed the boy from mind. Once she stopped, and turned to face the other way.

"Did you hear him then?" she asked. "It sounded like a scream. What makes him scream, Uncle Jethro? Boys don't scream like that unless they're hurt or very angry."

"I reckon it's because he's angry," grimly replied Jethro. "He's 'most always angry

at something. He has a very ugly and nasty temper. I wouldn't think of him, Polly."

But Polly was thinking of him, and the harder her companion tried to make her forget, the more her active imagination dwelt upon the subject.

"Maybe he has horrid, cruel parents, Uncle Jethro," she continued after a pause. "Parents are sometimes that way. They don't like little boys and girls, and they treat them with scorn. Maybe that isn't a house, but a big castle, and the little boy is shut up in it. Did you ever see him?"

"Yes, I reckon I did—lots of times."

"What's he like?"

"There's your Aunt Miranda coming to find you," was all Jethro would say in reply, glad that he could so easily change the trend of the conversation. "She looks as if she'd been worrying. I clean forgot she told me to hurry back."

Miranda approached the two, and greeted

them with a voice that quavered a little with emotion.

"Land sakes, Jethro!" she exclaimed. "You been gone so long I was nearly distracted. Has anything happened to Polly?"

"No, Aunt Miranda," assured the child, running forward and kissing her. "I just wandered out there in the woods, and Uncle Jethro found me. We talked of the trees and flowers—and—and of little boys. Aunt Miranda, what little boy lives over there in that house?"

If Polly had been suspicious, she might have read some meaning in the sudden stiffening of the muscles in the arms that encircled her, and in the queer, strained intonation of Miranda's voice.

"What house do you mean, Polly?" she asked. "Has Jethro been telling you anything?"

"No, Aunt Miranda, he didn't tell me anything. I don't think he knows much

about the little boy. I should think he would know everything about him, but he doesn't, except that he's cross and ugly. But you will tell me."

Miranda breathed a sigh of relief.

"No, Polly, I can't tell you much about him, either," she replied. "He lives over there with his mother, and that's all there is to tell about it."

"Is his mother good to him?" queried the girl.

"I don't know—yes, I guess she's good to him. I don't see her often, but I suppose she is. Now come home, Polly. I've been 'most worried to death, you were gone so long. I declare to goodness, Jethro and I got nearly distracted when you disappeared. We thought something dreadful had happened to you."

Polly laughed gleefully.

"Did you think some dragon had run away with me, and carried me to his cave, or some big giant had picked me up for

his supper? I wonder if you have dragons and giants around here, Aunt Miranda."

"Goodness, no, child! Don't you know there are no such things in the world?"

"There *used* to be, Aunt Miranda, and I love to hear about them. Can you tell me the story of Jack the Giant Killer? Oh, I'd just love to hear it again. It makes you all creepy and shivery and so sort of pleasantly afraid. I used to crawl under the bedclothes at night and imagine I was a little girl hiding in a cave from the giants, and then Jack would come along and rescue me. I wonder if this little boy looks anything like Jack. I'd like to see him. Will you invite him over some day to see me, Aunt Miranda?"

"No, no, Polly, I can't! Don't ask such a question. There now, forget the boy, and come in to dinner."

But Polly was very quiet and thoughtful during the meal. Miranda and Jethro watched her with growing alarm, and

glanced at each other meaningly. After dinner Polly was induced to play in the front yard with her flowers and an old rag doll that she had brought from the asylum with her. But her play was less natural and enthusiastic than usual, and at times she would pause in it listlessly.

"She's lonesome, Miranda," Jethro whispered sadly. "She wants children to play with. That's why she was so excited over Dick Edward. We ought to get her some little girl to play with."

Miranda sighed and folded her hands thoughtfully.

"How'll we get one?"

"There's Beulah Smith's little girl. They say she's a bright little thing for her age."

"Yes, and have her stick up her nose at Polly, and twit her about her blindness. No Beulah Smith's brat will have a chance to do that while I'm alive. Polly's worth a dozen of them Smith girls."

Jethro concurred in this opinion sufficiently to let the matter drop, but he knitted his brows, and finally suggested another playmate for Polly.

"There's Jim Baker's little boy; he might——"

"A boy would be too rough for Polly," interrupted Miranda. "She's got to have a girl."

"Well, there's Hiram Brown's Helen. She's older than Polly, but she might do."

"I don't like Helen Brown since she's got so big she's left off playing with dolls. She's too snippish and uppish, anyway."

"Might try the Simpson girl," continued Jethro unabashed.

"She lives too far away. Polly couldn't go there calling, and she'd be lonelier than ever."

"Well," observed Jethro scratching his head, "I guess that about accounts for all the girls round these parts. What you going to do, Miranda?"

Miranda was thinking hard.

"Jethro," she said deliberately, "when you go down to the village again you might price that doll in Jones' store window. I saw it the other day, and I thought of Polly then."

"That there big doll, with the golden hair and the blue, fluffy dress?" he exclaimed in consternation. "Why, Miranda, that'll cost 'most—'most five dollars. Seems to me I saw the price on it. Yes, it was five dollars, sure's I'm alive."

"Well, 'ain't you got the money? If not, I have. I'll buy it for Polly. I got a little something saved up for a rainy day."

She started across the kitchen floor, and took down a jar from one of the shelves, but before she could open her treasure chest, Jethro interfered.

"No, no, Miranda," he protested, "it wasn't that. Nothing ain't too good for Polly. I got the money, and I'll get the doll to-day."

"I'm going to pay for half of it, Jethro," replied Miranda firmly. "Then I'll feel as if I'd had something to do with it. Here's my share."

And she counted out the sum in dimes, quarters, and half dollars to confirm her words. Jethro watched her without speaking, his shrewd eyes growing bigger as he saw the pile of money, and his heart beating a tattoo against his chest, as Miranda's sudden generosity fully dawned upon him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SO Polly became the owner of the big doll from Jones' exhibition window, a doll that had excited the envy and admiration of all the children within a ten-mile radius of Woodbine. Its purchase by Jethro caused endless comment and gossip, and its disappearance from the window created a sense of loss among the school children who stopped there daily to admire it and secretly long for it. For a blind girl it was certainly a wonderfully dressed and painted doll, with blue eyes, yellow curls, red lips, and cheeks that would rival the hue of the peach; it had painted eyelashes but real hair, dimples in its cheeks and chubby hands, and clothes of fine lace and colored ribbons to match its complexion. It was a dainty creation to be admired and loved.

But Polly could only guess at its splendor. She made Jethro describe over and over again its virtues, the color of its eyes and hair, the pink of its cheeks, the wonderful dress with its lace edging and bright ribbons. She asked Miranda if the doll looked just like a baby, and if it was a little girl would she like it for her own ; she plied the old lady with questions about her dolls when she was a little girl, and asked her if she thought it was wicked to love dolls "really and truly," if she had no children of her own to love. And would Miranda love the doll as much as she loved Polly if the doll should come to life some day?

The series of questions prompted by the gift of the doll were so many and so perplexing that both Miranda and Jethro were often at a loss. But it was their combined gift, the first real purchase of any consequence they had made for another person in years, and Polly's continual interest in the doll pleased and flattered them. Every

day the doll was dressed and undressed, talked to and scolded, and carried from porch to garden, and from garden to orchard. Polly was tireless in her care of her new plaything.

"I reckon she never had such a doll before," remarked Jethro one day.

"I hope she won't tire of it, and wish for other playmates," replied Miranda.

"I guess we about settled that for her in getting the doll. She 'ain't once asked about Dick."

"I hope she never will think of him again."

Miranda closed her lips firmly as she said this, and the expression of her face was hard and determined. Jethro, too, looked disturbed, and a slow frown gathered on his face.

Polly was not of the kind to limit her pleasure in the doll to seven days; it was a wonder and consolation to her for seven times seven. As the weeks sped swiftly

and silently, and the spring settled into summer, with the apple blossoms setting tiny fruit, and the honeysuckles losing their fragrance and color as the more gorgeous marigolds and larkspurs succeeded them, Polly essayed farther and farther afield with her doll to introduce her to her friends of the woods and meadows. She showed her the lark's nest, now filled with wide-mouthed birdlings; she fed the gray squirrel, talking first to the skipping animal and then to her doll; she took her to the woods and introduced the birds and snails to her, and rocked her to sleep under the canopy of green boughs.

Jethro and Miranda had ceased to worry about Polly's long absences from the house, and she had the freedom of the farm, which extended for sixty acres on each side of the woodland lot. So long as she kept within the snake fence, which inclosed the Baldwin property, she was safe from accident or mishap. The season's crops were now

ripening, and Jethro's time was occupied in cultivating them. Miranda was busy in the house preparing for the harvest season, when extra hired workers would descend upon the place and make great inroads upon her kitchen. She always prepared ahead of time for the harvest season, cooking and baking and preserving so that in an emergency she would have an ample larder to fall back upon.

So it came about gradually that Polly was left more and more to herself. Miranda felt that the big doll answered all of the child's cravings for companionship, and the newly-made aunt forgot her dread of other children disturbing the quiet serenity of their home.

But one day when Polly was rocking her doll to sleep, crooning a lullaby, as she swung lightly on the branch of a forest tree, a startled scream near caused her to jump down in breathless haste. The scream was followed by another more disturbing

than the first, and then came a paroxysm of wild sobbing.

Polly stood motionless for a moment, then she turned her face in the direction of the noise. A minute later she was gliding cautiously but accurately toward the place from which the screams and wild sobs seemed to come. She halted at the edge of a thicket; she knew by the kicking and threshing of the bushes that she was near the person who was causing all the disturbance. The sobbing continued unabated.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she called in alarm.

There was complete silence; the sobbing and the threshing of feet ceased.

"Are you hurt, little—little boy?"

The little boy lying half concealed among the bushes stared up at this strange apparition, and let his tears dry in dirty streaks on his face. There was an ugly scowl on it, too, but fortunately Polly could not see that.

"Where are you?" Polly continued, as the boy's silence made it difficult for her to locate him. "Won't you tell me where you are?"

There was no response to this appeal. As if possessed with a resolution, the head suddenly flattened itself on the ground: if he had not been discovered, he would hide. Polly made a few ineffectual attempts to approach him, but she was utterly confused by her surroundings. She had run out of her beaten track and had not stopped to count her steps.

But in wandering around she accidentally stepped nearer, and trod on something soft and yielding. A howl of pain rent the air, as the boy jerked his hand away and struck at her.

"Get away!" he shouted. "I'll knock you over if you don't! You've stepped on my hand and broke it. Oh, oh, you've killed me!"

Accompanying the howls with vigorous

kicks and insane flaying of Polly's legs with his hands, little Dick Edward made his acquaintance with Polly in a decidedly ungentlemanly manner. For a few moments Polly stood the blows of the tiny hands unflinchingly. Then she turned on him quickly.

"Stop that, you naughty boy! Stop it, I tell you, this instant! Do you hear me?"

"I won't!" stubbornly replied Dick.

"You will! Yes, you will! Stop it!"

The blows grew feebler and less frequent. Polly was bending over him with upraised hand. If Dick had known that the eyes were sightless, he might have continued his display of temper, but to his youthful imagination Polly looked severe and threatening.

"There now, I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself," cried Polly, when the blows ceased entirely. "I guess you are. If you're sufficiently humble and

sorry, I'll forgive you. I won't bear any grudge against you. I'll try to be magnanimous, and forget it."

The boy mumbled something inaudible, his voice half smothered in the grass and leaves. His silence awakened sympathy in Polly, and she changed her voice to one of friendliness.

"Now tell me where you're hurt, and what hurt you," she said. "I'm awfully sorry for you. I heard your screams, and ran breathlessly to see who was killing you. I really thought somebody was being murdered. Oh, it was terrible! Did you ever see anybody murdered, little boy? I didn't, but I can imagine how dreadful it must be. What is your name, little boy?"

"I won't tell you!" was the stubborn reply.

"Then I'll name you. Perhaps you never had a name. I knew a boy we called Tinker. If you haven't any name, I'll call you that."

"No you won't! That ain't my name. I'm Dick."

"Well, Dick, I'm Polly. Now we know each other, and we can talk together. But first tell me what hurt you."

"I won't," came sullenly from the grass.

Polly essayed to ignore this reply, and seated herself on the ground near the prostrate boy.

"You nearly frightened my dolly to death," she reproached. "I must put her to sleep again, or she'll cry her eyes out. Wouldn't it be terrible if she went blind, too? Oh, my, it makes me shudder! I don't think I'd ever forgive you, Dick, if that should happen to Dolly."

Dick raised his head slowly from the grass, and peered at the little talker. His eyes wandered from Polly to the big doll in her lap.

"Where'd you get that doll?" he asked suddenly. "That's the big doll they had in Jones' store. How'd you get it?"

"Sh! Don't wake her up," cautioned Polly. "If you scream again, I'll have to fly away for Dolly's sake."

"I will scream if I want to," replied Dick.

"Please don't," she begged.

"I will *if* it frightens you."

"Never mind. Dolly's awake, and I can't put her to sleep after all this. Now let me hear you scream."

"I won't now."

Polly turned her face toward the boy, and seemed very thoughtful for a time. Dick's eyes fell before hers, and he began digging the toe of a foot in the dirt.

"You're the most disagreeable boy I ever met," Polly observed finally. "If you were my little boy, I'd put you to bed without supper, and make you stay there until you were better. And I'd wash your mouth out with soap and water. Are you always like this, Dick? If you are, I don't think I want to know you. But, then, perhaps you

can't help it. Some little boys are born that way. I suppose I should be forgiving and resigned. Well, Dick, I'll forgive you again. Mrs. Wilson said we should forgive our enemies seventy times seven, and that's a whole lot. I don't know whether I can do that, but I'll try. Yes, I'll try real hard. If you're good I'll call you Dick, and if you're bad I think I'll call you Tinker."

"No you won't. I'll scream if you do."

"Well, Tinker, I don't call that being very good."

"You stop calling me that or I'll hit you."

"No, you won't, Tinker! Tinker!"

Dick's face underwent a change; it grew red and sullen, and then puckered into an angry scowl. Suddenly he opened his mouth and emitted a series of screams and howls, kicking the dirt and bushes vigorously with both feet. Polly started violently at first, but as the boy continued hysterically, going from one spasm into

another, her little face turned pale and then red. She leaned over, seized Dick by the shoulders, and shook him vigorously.

"Stop that, Tinker! Stop it!" she commanded. "I'll call you Tinker until you do stop. Tinker! Tinker! Tinker!"

She shouted the odious name until nearly out of breath. Dick continued howling and kicking, but Polly was made of stern stuff, and she would not be howled down.

"Tinker! Tinker! Tinker!"

Fainter and fainter grew the howlings. Polly's voice was getting weak and husky, but she kept at it bravely. If Dick ceased his struggles and screams she made long pauses between each word, but on the slightest sign of his renewing his howls, she would call out more loudly and firmly. Finally the boy's fit of anger was spent, and his screams subsided into pitiful little sobs. Polly stopped calling the name; she even reached out a hand, and patted his head.

"Now don't cry, Dick," she soothed. "It's all over. I'll never call you that again unless you make me. I'm going to play with you, and we can't play if you howl like a baby. Where's your handkerchief, Dick? I'll be a good Samaritan and wipe away the tears."

Polly sought the pocket of the lad to find the handkerchief, but her hand came in contact with something that excited her curiosity.

"What's this, Dick?" she asked, picking it up, and feeling of it carefully.

"Let it alone," replied Dick. "It's my crutch."

"Your crutch?" exclaimed Polly in surprise. "What are you doing with a crutch? You're not lame, are you, Dick? Tell me, are you—lame?"

"What do you ask me that for? You know I am. You ain't going to make fun of me. If you do, I'll hit you with the crutch."

"Dick," said Polly slowly, "don't tell me you're—you're a cripple."

"Yes, I am, and you know it. Now hand me my crutch. You ain't going to make fun of me."

Polly yielded the crutch to him. She was too shocked to speak for some time.

"Dick, where are you?" she asked after a pause.

"Where do you suppose? Can't you see me?"

"No, Dick, I can't. Didn't you know I was blind?"

"Blind?" ejaculated Dick in awe. "Ah, no, you ain't! You're just fooling me. Your eyes are wide open."

"Truly and honestly, Dick, I can't see a thing. I've been blind ever since I was a little tiny baby."

"Go on! I don't believe you."

"But, Dick, I'm telling you the truth. Ask Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro. They'll tell you."

At these names Dick sat upright, and looked hard at the speaker. He began to remember something he had heard of the girl at the Baldwin farm.

"Are you from Jethro Baldwin's?" he demanded. "Are you that blind girl?"

"Yes, I'm Polly, and I live with Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin—Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda."

Dick was duly impressed. He had never seen a blind girl, and Polly was a sort of curiosity to him; he forgot his anger, and looked at her with large, full eyes.

"Can't you see a little bit out of the corner of your eyes?" he queried.

"No, not a little tiny bit."

"See that?" he asked, waving his hands in front of her face.

"See what, Dick?" she replied innocently.

Still unconvinced, Dick raised his crutch, and jabbed the end within an inch of the girl's eyes. She did not flinch, and he

stopped to consider. A shrewd, wily expression overspread his face. Reaching in his pocket, he drew forth a fine new knife.

"I got a new knife to-day," he announced. "Ain't she a beauty?"

He held it up a foot away from her.

"Where is it, Dick? Let me feel of it."

"Here," he said, holding it purposely away to one side. Polly reached out her hand, but it touched his face instead of his hand. Dick seemed satisfied at last.

"You must be blind," he remarked with conviction. "I was just trying you."

Polly smiled. "Yes, I'm blind."

Once more a question of doubt entered the boy's face, and he asked:

"How'd you get here, if you was blind?"

"I followed your voice, Dick. I heard you crying and screaming, and I can follow voices easily."

"How you going to get back, then?"

"You're going to lead me until I reach

the snake fence. Then I can follow it home."

"How d' you know I'm going to?"

"Because I know you will, Dick. You're going to be a good little boy, and we'll play together every day."

"I guess Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin won't let us."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I just guess so. Besides, my mother won't—but I will, if I want to."

"I'll ask Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro if I can't play with you," Polly said, "and you ask your mother."

Dick laughed loudly and shrilly.

"I guess not. If we ask them, they'll say no. If we're going to play together, we mustn't say anything to them. We'll just play here, and not let them know."

Polly looked dubious. She had never concealed anything from her guardians, and it troubled her now to think of doing anything so disobedient.

"I'll think of it, Dick," she replied slowly, rising from her seat. "Now will you lead me back to the fence?"

"Will you come back to-morrow?" Dick asked anxiously.

Polly paused a moment in doubt.

"Yes, I'll come to-morrow, and then I'll tell you what I'll do."

"All right. Then I'll show you the fence."

CHAPTER EIGHT

POLLY returned home very quietly and pensively. She carried her doll in her arms with loving devotion, but it was apparent from her attitude and indifferent remarks to it that her mind was pondering deeper and more serious things than those pertaining to a mere doll. She smoothed its ruffled dress, patted its curly hair, and even kissed its waxen cheeks, but with a certain lack of enthusiasm that was unusual to her.

She put the doll to bed early that night, and repaired to the kitchen to help Aunt Miranda with the dishes. She worked silently and swiftly. Miranda was almost too busy to notice the child's restraint, and after a hard day in the fields, Jethro was inclined to doze over his paper. When the

dishes were all clean and put away in their accustomed places on the shelves, Polly entered the dining-room and took a low seat near Mrs. Baldwin.

"Aunt Miranda," she began, "do you know of any little crippled boy living around here?"

Mrs. Baldwin started and frowned. Jethro roused himself from his cat nap, and took interest in the question.

"For if you do," Polly continued, not waiting for an answer, "I've been playing with him. I was so sorry when I found he was a cripple that my heart went right out to him. I thought of the crippled boys in the Home, for you know there were some —three, I think. Yes, there were three."

"Land sakes, child, have you been playing with Dick Edward?" Miranda gasped in consternation.

"Yes, it was Dick. He said his name was Dick, but I called him Tinker when he cried. He didn't like that name, and I

called 'Tinker! Tinker!' until he stopped. He was a very nice boy then. I think he must cry and scream because he is a cripple. Don't you, Aunt Miranda?"

"He's a spoilt child, Polly, and you mustn't play with him," Miranda answered severely.

"Yes, Aunt Miranda, he said that."

"Said what,—he was a spoilt child?"

"No, he said you wouldn't let me play with him if I asked you. Why don't you want me to play with him?"

Mrs. Baldwin's face worked strangely, and a hard glitter came into her eyes.

"You can't understand, Polly," she replied finally. "I can't tell you. But your Uncle Jethro and I don't want you to have anything to do with him."

Polly was quiet. She held the withered hand in her two soft, slim ones, and toyed quietly with it. Once she pressed it to her lips.

"It must be terrible to be a cripple, and

go round on crutches all your life, don't you think so, Aunt Miranda?" she remarked after a long pause. "I should think it would make one feel cross and ugly. I think maybe I'd be a dreadful little girl if I was a cripple."

"Yes, dear, I suppose it must be," assented Miranda, growing uncomfortable. "But it can't be helped."

"And Dick must be very lonely without any one to play with, don't you think so? I wonder if he has a doll to play with. Boys sometimes play with dolls—little boys,—and Dick is only about my size. I wonder if he has a doll. Do you know, Aunt Miranda?"

"No, no, child, I don't know anything about him. I wouldn't talk of him any more. Your Uncle Jethro and I have reasons for asking you not to play with him."

"And his mother doesn't want him to play with me."

"Did he say so?" quickly, with a grim smile.

"I think he meant that; but he said he'd play with me, anyway."

"It's just like him; he takes after his father. I wouldn't have him round here. No, Polly, you mustn't have anything to do with him."

"Was his father a very bad man?"

"He was —— But never mind, Polly, you can't understand. You're not going to see him again, are you?"

"Only once, Aunt Miranda."

"What do you mean, Polly? You intend to disobey me?"

"No, Aunt Miranda, but I told him I'd speak to you about it, and let him know to-morrow. I'll tell him then I can't play with him."

Mrs. Baldwin breathed a sigh of relief. The conversation was awkward, and the child's persistent inquiries were opening an old wound and making her uncomfortable.

Polly rose suddenly, as if the interview was at an end. Miranda watched her with anxious eyes. Polly walked over to Jethro and kissed him.

"Good-night, uncle," she said. Then she returned to her aunt, to kiss her good-night. Miranda's lips quivered as she felt the imprint of the kiss, and a tear stood in her eyes.

When Polly had gone upstairs, the other two sat there for a long time in gloomy silence. Uncomfortable memories were stirring within their minds; harsh words uttered in the past rankled in their hearts. Jethro stirred from his drowsiness, and looked over at his wife.

"Well, Miranda," he began, "I reckon Polly's got us in for a heap of trouble."

"Not if it doesn't go any further, and it mustn't, Jethro. It must stop right here. She'll never have anything to do with Mary Edward's child."

"But she's going to be disappointed and

upset. Poor little thing, she looked as if she'd lost her doll and everything else."

"We must get her another playmate," replied Miranda firmly. "There are other children besides that Dick Edward."

"Yes, but none so near, and, besides, we don't know that they'd play with her."

"Not play with Polly? Why?"

"They might make fun of her, and call her names."

Miranda winced and stuck a needle in her finger.

"I believe," she observed sharply, "that you want her to play with Sam Edward's boy."

"I reckon that ain't fair, Miranda. I 'ain't got no reason to think well of any child of Sam's. He did treat me right mean. He about as well as stole that lower meadow field from me, law or no law, and I 'ain't forgot it. But he's dead now, and Mary 'ain't had the easiest time of it. That little Dick gives her a heap of trouble. She's

spoilt him giving in so much to him, but I suppose she had to be easy with him, seeing he was a cripple."

"I don't think we're called upon to show any sympathy for her, after what she said about us. Her tongue's sharper'n her wit."

Jethro stroked his whiskers reflectively.

"She did say pretty mean things about you, Miranda, that's a fact, and I ain't forgetting that. She had no call to say them, either."

Jethro got up and paced back and forth a few times, his hands folded beneath the tails of his coat. He squinted up at the ceiling, glanced down at the carpet, and took a long look out of the window.

"I suppose Polly will take it kinder hard at first," he remarked finally, "but she'll soon get over it."

"Yes, children don't remember such things very long," Miranda answered with a sigh.

"I dunno about that. Polly seems to

have a pretty long memory. I wouldn't be surprised if she remembered it a good many days."

"We must find some way to entertain her then so it will help her to forget. We'll take her to the village to-morrow. I want to do some shopping, and I might buy her material for a new dress."

"Wasn't she going to see Dick to-morrow to tell him?"

"Yes, but ——"

"No, I wouldn't do that," interrupted Jethro. "Polly's mighty careful about keeping her word, and if she promised Dick we'd better let her go."

"Well, then we'll take her to the village the next day."

"I reckon that will be better."

So Polly had the opportunity to keep her appointment with Dick, as she had promised. Neither Jethro nor Miranda interposed any objection when she announced the following afternoon that she was going to meet

Dick, and tell him she couldn't play with him.

"You mean forever and ever, Aunt Miranda, don't you?" she asked before she set out.

Mrs. Baldwin winced at this point-blank query, and had to gulp hard before she answered.

"Forever and ever is a long time, Polly," she said gently. "I think it's enough to tell him that you can't play with him. He'll understand."

"Yes, Aunt Miranda, I'll tell him that, and maybe if he's very, very good, some day it will be different. It isn't like saying forever and ever. That sounds so dreadful. It makes you think there's no hope. I believe it would almost break my heart to say that to any one."

Her face brightened, and Miranda replied with a wistful smile illuminating her own face:

"Well, don't say it, dear. I wouldn't

want you to say anything that would break your heart."

Miranda watched her with mingled feelings of regret and sorrow, as the little girl trudged across the fields, carrying her doll, and following the snake fence with unerring accuracy. When she had disappeared from sight, Miranda Baldwin turned and entered the back door, but there was no joy in her heart, and the sight of her comfortable stove burning brightly, with the teakettle singing merrily on the top, failed to arouse her from her melancholy.

In the meanwhile Polly proceeded across the field, and reached the woods ahead of the appointed time. She sat down on a log and began playing with her doll. Suddenly there was a shrill little laugh, and Dick, who had been standing motionless before her, exclaimed:

"There, I know you're blind, for you didn't see me, and I stood right in front of you."

"How long have you been here, Dick?" Polly asked in a serious voice.

"Half an hour, and I waited and waited for you to come. You see, I didn't expect they'd let you. They don't like me, and I don't like them. They're not nice to my mother, and I hate any one who don't like her."

"Dick, have you been screaming and crying since I saw you?" demanded Polly severely.

"Only once," was the shamefaced acknowledgment.

"Then I ought to call you Tinker once. Yes, I really must. Now I'll hurry and get it over with. Tinker!"

Polly paused to hear if a scream would follow; but Dick did not speak or move. Now that the punishment was over, Polly became sympathetic and solicitous.

"How do you feel to-day, Dick? I hope you are quite well. Does your cripple hurt you—I mean your legs or—or back? Where

are you crippled, Dick? You see I don't know where it is."

"All over, I guess. If you could see me, Polly, you'd run away and call me names. That's what all the boys and most of the girls do. They say I'm ugly-looking, and that I'm all twisted and deformed."

"Oh, Dick, you know I wouldn't do that! I couldn't bear to laugh at any one crippled. If I could see you, I know I'd just love you. I knew a crippled boy once, and we were great friends. When I left the Home he cried, and said he'd never forget me. I wonder if he remembers me now."

"Was his name Tinker?"

"No, Tinker was a bad boy; that's why I called you Tinker when you screamed and hollered. It hurt me, Dick, to do it, but you know we have to perform our duty even if it does pain us. Sometimes it's a joyful pain, because we know we've done right. Don't you think so? Once Mrs. Wilson

had to punish this Tinker because he was so bad, and it made her cry to do it, but she smiled through her tears, and I think she must have felt glad that she'd done the right thing, and that it was all over."

Polly turned her face upward, as if she could see Dick in spite of the curtain of darkness that obscured her vision.

"But I wish," she added in a wistful voice, "that I didn't have to tell you the worst, Dick. It won't be a joyful pain at all; it's all the sorrowful kind for me. But maybe it won't be forever and ever. No, it won't be that, for Aunt Miranda said I needn't tell you forever and ever."

"What is it you're going to tell me?" prompted Dick.

Polly hesitated a moment, and then replied:

"Now you must be a good boy, Dick, and some day it may be different. Aunt Miranda says I can't play with you, and this is the last time we can meet. Isn't it

awful? It makes me feel like crying. I think I should, if it wouldn't make you scream. Yes, I would; it would make me feel better. Mrs. Wilson said crying relieved one's feelings, and I'd like to have mine relieved."

"I knew she wouldn't let you—the mean old thing!" cried Dick. "But what do we care? You can run away, and come out here, and they won't know it."

Polly shook her head.

"I couldn't do that, Dick, and you shouldn't either."

"I will, too!" vehemently retorted Dick. "I'll do what I please. I run away often."

"Oh, Dick! Now I shall have to call you Tinker many, many times. But I'll say it to myself, for this is our last meeting. Now keep quiet while I say it."

Polly's lips moved, and Dick watched her with wide eyes. He could hardly understand this little playmate who insisted upon punishment for every offence; and

although he knew she was saying "Tinker" over and over again, strangely enough he did not resent it.

"There now, I feel better," she said finally. "Now, Dick, you mustn't ever run away again. If you do, I'll have to say 'Tinker' so often that it may make me sick. You're going to promise me?"

"If you'll play with me, I will."

"I'll play with you to-day, but not any more. But, Dick," facing him earnestly, "I'll always think of you. I'll be with you in spirit, you know, and sometimes if I know you're over the fence, I'll wave to you."

"Will you?" eagerly. "I'll come every day out here; but," and his voice dropped anxiously, "you can't see me, and how'll you know I'm here?"

Polly pondered a minute in silence.

"Do you know how to whistle like a quail, Dick?" she asked.

"Do I? You bet I do!"

To prove his ability in this line, he imitated the shrill call of " Bob White " to perfection, and Polly clapped her hands happily.

" Now, Dick, when I hear that whistle, I'll reply. See, I know how to do it."

And Polly puckered her lips, and gave the quail call as well as Dick could.

" But," ventured Dick, wavering a little, " how'll I know it's you? It may be a real quail calling."

" Then we'll laugh at the joke, Dick, and it won't hurt us. We must answer every time, whether it's a quail or not."

Dick grinned.

" I guess Mr. Baldwin will think there's a lot of quails round here," he remarked.

" Now let's play it," suggested Polly. " We want to get used to the call. Maybe we'll learn to know it from the real quail's whistle."

For half an hour they played in the woods, whistling back and forth, and hid-

ing from each other. Dick would go off some distance and whistle, and Polly would reply, and then search for him, following the sounds as unerringly as if gifted with eyesight. Dick clapped his hands with joy every time she found him. So the afternoon waned, and forgetful of the final parting, the two children enjoyed themselves as heartily as if no shadow of separation hung over them to obscure their sunshine.

CHAPTER NINE

DURING the busy season of planting and harvesting Jethro Baldwin made only weekly or semi-weekly trips to the village; but the necessity of entertaining Polly, now that she was forbidden to play with Dick Edward, induced him to harness Billy and make various pretexts for visiting Woodbine every day or two. Sometimes Miranda would accompany them, and while Jethro performed his errands in the village she would take Polly to the stores or other places where people foregathered.

Few strangers would ever guess that Polly was blind; her eyes were beautiful in spite of her great affliction, and except for a slight stare they were almost normal in appearance. Polly was a beautiful girl, and now that her figure was becoming rounded,

she often attracted attention by her physical charms. The life on the farm apparently agreed with her, for her skin was tanned, and her cheeks bright and rosy. Her long auburn hair curled about her ears and forehead, and formed a striking contrast to the blue eyes.

Often people would make admiring remarks, and sometimes they would stop and speak to her. Mrs. Baldwin secretly enjoyed these compliments as much as if they had been bestowed upon her personally. She was never afraid that strangers would detect Polly's blindness, for the girl was quick-witted and unusually self-reliant. She was, as she would say, prepared for any emergency; and she was never at a loss for words when spoken to.

Comparatively few of the inhabitants of Woodbine knew that the Baldwins had a blind girl staying with them, and the few who did know the secret could hardly credit their senses when they met Polly.

Polly had such an intuitive sense of direction that she could walk by her aunt's side without touching her arm, and any one seeing the two strolling leisurely down the Main Street would never dream of the girl's defective vision.

"You don't need to take me by the arm, Aunt Miranda," Polly had told her. "I can feel you by my side, and I know I'm safe."

At first Mrs. Baldwin was anxious and worried, and her heart fluttered every time they passed strangers or came to a crossing, but gradually she learned to trust Polly's intuition implicitly. When they reached a crossing, if Polly did not have hold of her arm, she whispered gently :

"Be careful, Polly."

And Polly soon learned to associate that warning with the curb or some other obstruction. The two learned a code of signals that helped them wonderfully. If friends approached to speak to them, Aunt Miranda would whisper in advance :

"Here comes Sally Jones, Polly," or "Here's Mr. Symonds, the minister. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Aunt Miranda. Is Sally Jones wearing that same plaid shawl?" or "Has Mr. Symonds his silk hat on?"

Polly was thus prepared to greet their friends without reserve or embarrassment. Miranda Baldwin took great pride in showing off Polly, and very soon she went to Woodbine with the girl nearly every time that Jethro made a trip.

"I declare, Miranda, you're getting to be quite a gadder," Jethro remarked one day. "Must be you're feeling spryer this summer."

"Polly may need me," she replied. "I don't think it's safe to let her wander around the streets alone. She might get run over."

"I reckon I'd look after her pretty well."

"Men are so thoughtless. I'd never feel comfortable if I stayed at home with you and Polly in the village."

"Well, maybe we do need a chaperon. I kinder like it. Always did feel better if I had a woman to look after me, and now I got two."

Jethro's words and chuckle caused Miranda no resentment or uneasiness of spirit. She had made up her mind to look after Polly, and if the truth were known, she got keen satisfaction and enjoyment out of it.

In the stores Miranda never forgot herself and exclaimed, "Look at this, Polly! Isn't it beautiful?"

Instead she would say, "Feel of this, Polly! How nice and soft it is! I wonder if it wouldn't make a pretty dress for you. It's such a beautiful shade of blue."

"Blue is my favorite color, Aunt Miranda," Polly would reply, although she had no exact idea of what any color was like. But she did have association of ideas about colors in her mind, and this answered the same purpose as if she could

see them with her physical eyes. Perhaps, after all, the mental picture was as real and genuine as that of the senses.

On the day after playing with Dick for the first and last time, Mrs. Baldwin took Polly to the local department store and gave her the choice of material for a new dress. Mrs. Baldwin had eased her conscience about Dick by deciding to give Polly the best that the store provided, and the woman and girl wandered from one pile of shimmering goods to another, examining, criticizing, and discussing the merits of the different materials with all the enthusiasm of two expert shoppers.

"This is so soft and velvety, Aunt Miranda," Polly exclaimed, selecting a piece that appealed to her sense of touch.

"Yes, dear, but it's red, an ugly shade."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! The cloth is so soft to the touch."

The man waiting on them smiled. He had followed them from one part of the

store to another, gazing with ill-concealed admiration at Polly, and listening intently to her remarks.

"She has remarkably good sense of the quality of goods," he commented now, looking from Polly to Miranda. "Every piece she has admired has been of the best quality. It's quite unusual for one so young. She seems to tell by touch."

Miranda beamed upon the clerk at this compliment, for such it was intended.

"Yes, Polly knows cloth better than I do. But we want something in blue. Have you any of this cloth in that shade?"

"I'll see," replied the salesman, "but I'm afraid not."

He searched diligently among the piles of goods, and finally brought out a piece of such a delicate blue that Miranda's eyes beamed with pleasure. When he had laid it on the counter, Polly extended her hand, and fingered it. A shadow drifted across her face.

"Aunt Miranda," she whispered, "this is not the same as the other piece. It doesn't feel so soft and velvety."

Aunt Miranda felt of the goods, and the salesman did the same. He looked puzzled, then glanced at the label and laughed.

"She's right," he acknowledged. "It deceived me at first. I thought it was the same, but it isn't. It's a cheaper grade. Well, I guess we can't deceive her."

Once more Mrs. Baldwin experienced a little glow of pleasure, and looked admiringly at Polly. The salesman smiled, too, and being the father of a girl about Polly's age, he felt like patting her on the head and praising her. Instead, however, he folded up the roll of cloth, and said:

"We're going to find what she wants, if it's in this store. Her judgment is excellent."

It required an immense amount of work to go through all the stock in the store, but the salesman was interested, and he cheerfully

went through the search until he finally discovered a piece satisfactory to them all. The color was all that could be desired, and Polly exclaimed enthusiastically :

"That's it, Aunt Miranda! Just feel how nice and soft it is! I'll just love to feel that I'm dressed in that. Is it a lovely shade of blue?"

"Yes, dear, just the shade of your eyes."

"The little girl is color-blind, isn't she?" the salesman asked, taking note of Polly's question.

"A little," admitted Aunt Miranda.

When they walked out of the store with the piece of cloth for Polly's dress, the clerk had no idea that he had been talking to a blind girl. He followed her plump, graceful figure with admiring eyes, and merely shook his head a little regretfully, and murmured :

"Too bad she's color-blind. But she's a wonderful girl. I wish my Mary was as bright."

Outside they met Jethro, who, with patient Billy, was waiting for them. The horse cocked an ear and turned his head at their approach. Polly patted his sleek neck and rubbed his moist nose before she entered the wagon; and Billy showed his pleasure immediately by neighing and flouncing a dozen flies from his back with a swish of his tail.

The weekly paper and a letter were lying on the front seat where Jethro had placed them. Miranda glanced at them indifferently, but Jethro called her attention to them by remarking:

"Got your specs with you, Miranda? There's a letter for me, and I can't make it out nohow."

"No, I left them home. Who's the letter from?"

"Dunno! That's what made me so curious. I ain't much good at reading without specs. Well, I guess it will keep till we get home."

Miranda picked up the letter and scrutinized it, but her own eyesight was none too good, and she finally laid the missive down again, and dismissed it from mind. She was experiencing a glow of satisfaction at having made a satisfactory purchase; she was already clothing Polly in the new dress and in her imagination Miranda could see Polly arrayed as only a beautiful girl should be.

The drive home through the fields and shaded woods was pleasant. Billy plodded along faithfully, swishing the flies with his tail, and shaking his mane every time a big green bottle-fly settled on it. When they neared the fork in the highway, and were turning to enter the land of the old Baldwin farm, the sudden whistle of a quail near by startled them.

"Must be a flock of quails nesting round here," Jethro remarked.

Polly started suddenly, and remembered her code of signals with Dick. Could it be

that Dick was in the vicinity, or was it a real quail whistling?

"Can you see him, Uncle Jethro?" she asked.

"I reckon not. Quails are too sharp to show themselves."

"Maybe he's calling for his mate," Polly suggested. "Let me see."

To the surprise of both Jethro and Miranda, Polly puckered her lips, and imitated the shrill, penetrating whistle of "Bob White" in a most life-like fashion.

"Well, Polly, you almost made me think I had a quail in the wagon," asserted Jethro. "How'd you learn to whistle like one?"

A moment later there was an answering response from the woods beyond the field.

"Well, he's heard you, and he's calling back," said Jethro, as the distant cry of "Bob White," or "Buckwheat's ripe" came rippling through the still air.

Polly whistled again, and once more

came the response, clear and shrill. Back and forth resounded the cry of the quail, Polly answering each cry from the woods. Fainter and fainter grew the whistles, as Billy trudged along, until the last echo was lost in the distance. Jethro and Miranda had listened in pleased surprise as the girl caught up each call and replied to it in kind.

"Well, Polly, you'll have them quails roosting in the chicken yard, if you keep that up," laughed Jethro, when they dismounted. "They do say they can eat a lot of buckwheat when they're hungry. Maybe I'll have to shoo them away."

"Have you any buckwheat, Uncle Jethro?" asked Polly, wondering for the first time if her agreement with Dick would lead to complications.

"No, and nothing else that a quail would want, I guess. I'm afraid they'd starve to death out here. There's nothing but corn and potatoes and garden truck."

"Maybe they like corn, Uncle Jethro."

"Never heard of 'em eating it, but you can't tell."

Polly and Miranda walked toward the house while Jethro stabled Billy. When the others were half-way up the walk, he called to them :

"Here's the letter, Miranda. Guess you forgot it."

Picking it up from the seat, he carried it to them, and then turned his attention to Billy. Miranda took the letter from him and glanced at it. Something in the corner attracted her attention. The words were plain enough, but without her spectacles she was unable to read it clearly. Something familiar about those printed letters in the corner, however, awakened an uneasy sense of impending disaster. When she reached the house, she laid her parcel down, and hunted for her spectacles.

Polly was opening the package, and was too intent on feeling the material for the

new dress to notice her aunt's excitement. Once the girl thought she heard a noise that sounded like a groan, and she turned quickly.

"Did you speak to me, Aunt Miranda?"

"No, dear," in a strained voice.

Then there was silence in the room. Mrs. Baldwin, with her spectacles adjusted, was rereading the letter, and as she read, her hands trembled. Suddenly she rose to her feet, and dragged herself across the floor. She stopped near Polly, and made an effort to control her voice.

"Polly," she said faintly, "I'm going out to see Jethro a minute. I forgot something. You stay here."

"Yes, Aunt Miranda. I'm all right."

Once outside the house, Miranda started on a run toward the barn. Her legs were weak, and she staggered at times, as if her emotion was too much for her. Reaching the door of the barn she stopped and gasped for breath. Then in a weak and trembling voice she called:

"READ IT!" SHE GASPED. "READ IT!"—*Page 165.*

"Jethro! Jethro!"

Jethro, coming out of the barn in response to the call, which sounded so different f. the one that he was accustomed to hear, replied quickly:

"Yes, Miranda! What is it?"

When he saw her, pale and trembling, holding a fluttering letter in her hand, his voice showed his growing alarm.

"What be the matter, Miranda! Anything—anything happened to Polly?"

"Read it!" she gasped. "Read it!"

CHAPTER TEN

JETHRO'S own hand trembled as he took the letter, and then remembering that he was without his spectacles, he handed it back to his wife with the comment:

"'Ain't got my specs, Miranda. You read it. What is it, anyway? Who's it from?"

"It's from the asylum, Jethro," quaked Miranda, "and it's about Polly."

"Well, what about her?" he demanded, recovering his voice and strength. "I guess there ain't anything wrong with her. If they do say so, I sha'n't believe it."

"No, it's n-not that," stammered Miranda. "She's all right, but it was a mistake—and they're coming to take her back."

"Well, I reckon they won't," replied

Jethro stoutly. "I guess I got something to say about that. Take her back, eh? I'd like to see 'em do it!"

Jethro's defiance and self-possession reassured Miranda somewhat, and she recovered a little of her old resolute spirit. The suddenness of the message had so startled her that for a moment it seemed as if they had lost Polly for good, and that nothing could prevent the asylum authorities from robbing them of the one who had grown so very dear to her and Jethro.

"Read the letter, Jethro," she pleaded, her voice still a little tremulous in spite of her returning courage.

"Can't do it, Miranda, without my specs."

"Then let me read it to you."

Miranda adjusted her own spectacles, and in a wavering voice began reading, stumbling painfully over the big words. The letter was typewritten, and the clearness of the characters made it much easier for her to decipher them.

"Mr. Jethro Baldwin," she read aloud, "Dear Sir: On the fifth of May we sent to you in care of the conductor of the train an orphan from this asylum, as you had agreed to give her a good home and take proper care of her. The one we had selected for you was named Jennie Hargood, as described in our previous letter. At the same time we were sending a little blind girl, named Polly Walters, to an institution for the blind in New England, where she could be properly taught under modern methods of education for the blind. In some inexplicable manner, the two girls got mixed at the railroad station, and our agent sent them to their wrong destinations. Jennie Hargood turned up at the institution for the blind, and we were duly notified; but we have not heard from Polly.

"We are anxious to know if she reached your home, for if not, we are at a loss to account for her disappearance. We judge, however, that she did, for we hold the

conductor's card with your signature attached. Will you kindly advise us by return mail if she is with you? We will then send one of our agents down to bring Polly back, and Jennie, whom you agreed to take, will be brought to you immediately.

"Regretting the inconvenience that our blunder may have caused you, and apologizing for what must have seemed to you an inexcusable error,

"I remain,

"Very truly yours,

"A. S. WILSON, SUPT."

Miranda finished the letter all in a flutter of excitement, her voice trailing off at the end. Jethro said nothing, but stroked his beard meditatively; unlike his wife he seldom permitted excitement to force him into an exclamation. Perhaps the momentous import of the letter had so completely dumfounded him that he was at a loss for words to express his astonishment.

"Jethro," said Miranda finally, when the silence became unendurable, "we might write them that she's not here. We could hide Polly if they came for her."

"No, Miranda, 'twouldn't do," replied Jethro. "They'd inquire of the neighbors, and there's that young station agent. He saw me sign for Polly and drive off with her."

"Couldn't we say she'd run away?" persisted his wife.

Jethro dismissed this suggestion from consideration with a wave of the hand.

"I guess, Miranda, we can't head them off that way. No, 'twouldn't do at all."

The calm, impassionate way in which Jethro accepted the situation disturbed Miranda, and her eyes flashing angrily, she burst out:

"Well, what are you going to do, Jethro Baldwin? Stand still, and do nothing while they cart Polly off? I thought you pretended to care for her. If *that's* all a

man's love amounts to, it's not like a woman's. If you won't fight for her, I will. I tell you, Jethro Baldwin, they sha'n't have Polly! I'll hide her—run away with her—do anything, before I'll let them take her! There, now!"

Jethro's eyes opened wide in surprise and wonder at his wife's exhibition of spirit, and when she finished, facing him with stormy eyes and pale, set features, he stared back at her speechlessly for several minutes.

"Why—why, Miranda," he stammered at last, "I had no notion of letting them take Polly away. What made you think so?"

"Because you stood there with your mouth open like a scared schoolboy. What are you going to do, then?"

"Why, Miranda, I hadn't made up my mind. I was thinking."

"And while you're thinking, they'll come and steal Polly from us."

"I reckon they're not coming right

away. They said I was to write to 'em first, didn't they?"

"Yes—but what are you going to write?"

"I'll have to think about that, Miranda. Perhaps if we tell them how much we care for Polly, they won't want to take her away. And Polly, I guess, will want to stay with us."

"Shall we speak to Polly about it?"

"No, I shouldn't—not yet awhile."

Miranda felt a little relieved now that some one shared the terrible secret with her, and Jethro's calmness had its effect in quieting her own excited fears. If he had taken the news in the same spirit as his wife, they might have conspired to prevent the asylum authorities from ever seeing Polly again, and in so doing would have laid themselves open to legal difficulties. Even the fear of such punishment would not have deterred Miranda from carrying out her purpose. The hunger of mother-love had at last been aroused in her, and

she was ready to battle against any odds to retain the one who had so completely entered and taken possession of her life.

After reading the letter carefully in the privacy of the kitchen Jethro further reassured his wife:

"I reckon they'll let her stay with us. They only want to know where she is. That's plain as daylight. You needn't worry about it, Miranda."

But Miranda did worry about it, and so did Jethro; but both kept their misgivings to themselves. So long as there was a mere possibility of having Polly taken away from them, they would continue to be in a state of excited apprehension. Jethro frequently would stop in the midst of his farm work and exclaim:

"Shucks now! I wonder if they could do it."

He was fully aware of the fact that he had no legal claim upon Polly; she had been sent to them by mistake, and more-

over, the asylum authorities had merely agreed to send a girl on trial. They had the right to terminate the arrangement at will until a permanent contract had been signed,—a right which he enjoyed on his side as well.

Miranda, in her turn, permitted her mind to dwell upon the subject until she often became obsessed with the idea that nothing they could do would prevent the terrible catastrophe. At such times she would raise her head from her work and look with wild, frightened eyes at Polly, if she were near, or up at the heavens if alone.

"I'll never let them!" she would exclaim under her breath. "I'll die first; it would kill me if they took her."

Jethro dispatched a letter in answer to the one from Mr. Wilson at once. They composed their reply with infinite care, both of them putting their heart and mind into the writing of it. In substance, it said

that Polly had duly reached them, that they wished to keep her; that they were both greatly attached to the girl, would give her a good home, and, moreover, would provide for her at their death. What more could be said or done?

Jethro mailed the letter with a sigh of satisfaction, but at the same time he experienced a little quaking of the heart and many misgivings. His faint-hearted attempts to give Miranda courage only half convinced her. She waited as anxiously as Jethro for the reply.

Meanwhile, the subject of all their conversations and lengthy discussions pursued the even tenor of her ways, totally unconscious of the impending trouble; she was as innocently happy and as oblivious of any change in the home atmosphere as the birds which nested under the eaves of the house, or the pair of gray squirrels rearing their young in the hollow of the oak. Polly devoted her time and attention to

her doll. For a day or two she tried to forget Dick, and she purposely kept away from the woods.

But the whistle of the quail would often reach her little ears, causing her to raise her head and ponder thoughtfully. She was not entirely sure in her mind that she was doing right in keeping up this clandestine communication with Dick. Sometimes when the whistle was faint and distant, she would ease her conscience by a soft response that could not be heard a dozen yards away.

A strong childish desire for companionship, however, often drew her to the field bordering the wood-lot. Without being seen, she could give the quail call from some hiding place in the hedge. Dick always responded, but if he ventured nearer, Polly would retreat toward the house. She would not break her word to Aunt Miranda and permit Dick to approach near enough to speak to her.

One day he tried to do this with such boldness that Polly had to rebuke him. He came hobbling across the field, and almost reached the other side of the hedge before she was aware of it.

"Ah, say, Polly," he called eagerly, "let's play together just once more, only to-day. I'll promise I won't do it again—cross my heart I won't. I'm so lonely, and I don't feel good to-day."

Polly retreated in dismay, leaving her doll in the hedge. Seeing her flight, and discovering the deserted doll at the same moment, Dick made a dive for it, and held it up in triumph.

"I got your doll!" he shouted. "Now you got to come and get it from me."

Polly stopped, and uttered a little cry of dismay.

"Dick, oh, Dick, put Dolly down and go away!" she entreated.

"You come and take it. I'll give it to you!"

"I can't. You know I can't, Dick. If you don't go away, I'll call you Tinker hard as I can, and never whistle to you again."

"You wouldn't be so mean as all that, Polly," replied Dick a little wistfully. "I'm lonely, and want somebody to play with."

Polly's heart was touched as much by the voice as the words, but she had no choice. She had to live up to her word to her aunt; still she could make it easy for the lonely boy.

"No, I won't call you Tinker, Dick," she went on more gently, "but I won't whistle for—for ever so long, if you don't mind me —yes, for days and days. Now," sternly, "will you mind?"

"I want you to play with me just this once."

Young as she was, Polly knew that she had to be severe.

"Dick," she answered promptly, "I'm

"I GOT YOUR DOLL!" — *Page 177.*

going to count one, two, three, and if you don't lay Dolly down and go away, I won't whistle to you again for as many days as I count. Now, I'm going to begin. Don't make me count, Dick."

A pause.

"Have you put her down?"

"No," was the stubborn reply. "I still got her."

"Then, Dick, I'm going to begin."

Another pause.

"One!" counted Polly. "That means I won't whistle to you to-morrow. Have you put her down?"

"No!" sullenly from across the hedge.

"Oh, Dick, don't make me —— Well, there, two! Now I can't whistle to you for two whole days. Have you put her down?"

No answer from Dick.

Polly trembled with excitement and trouble; she didn't want to count three. Three whole days! It would seem like an eternity! But Dick was obdurate; he had

had his way so often that it was hard for him to yield. In the long pause that followed they faced each other defiantly.

"Three!" cried Polly in determination. "Have you put her down, Dick?"

The battle for supremacy was running strong between these two sturdy wills. Dick clung to the doll, but his lips were quivering. Polly was equally excited, and dreaded to say the words that she was obliged to if Dick didn't obey.

"Four!" she wailed. "Oh, Dick, think of it! Four long days! Don't make it five."

The tears were ready to burst forth from the girl's sightless eyes, but she held them back with a strong will. The counting seemed like tolling her own funeral dirge.

"Five!" she called, and this time she made no appeal to the boy.

"Six!" she added a moment later, and her lips were pursed to continue evenly with her count.

But on the sixth count Dick's stubbornness broke. He dropped the doll with a sharp cry of pain, and cried shrilly:

"I put her down, Polly, and I'm going. Don't count any more! Good-bye!"

Polly stood motionless, listening to his retreating footsteps. When they grew faint and far away, she moved slowly and carefully toward the hedge where she had left the doll. Then she groped among the bushes and vines for it. When her hand finally touched it, she picked it up, and hugged it passionately to her bosom.

And then without any premeditation she dropped down on the grass, and sobbed softly, but as convulsively as if her little heart would break.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE flock of quails, which Jethro supposed had settled down on the farm, seemed to have suddenly deserted the place, and after the third morning of their absence he began to notice that their shrill whistle no longer burst forth from field and hedge and stubble. He missed their call, and said so to Polly and Miranda.

"Must have starved 'em out," he remarked regretfully. "Kinder wished I had fed 'em with a little buckwheat. Wonder now if we couldn't call 'em back and keep 'em here. Polly, let's see if you can't call 'em?"

Polly blushed, and then turned pale.

"I don't think I can, Uncle Jethro," she replied, trembling; it was only the fourth

day, and two more were necessary to fulfill her pledge to Dick. "My whistle is out of order," she explained, "but maybe in a few days I can call them."

"'Ain't got a cold, have you, Polly?" asked Jethro anxiously.

"I believe she has," said Miranda. "She's been silent and listless like for several days now. Where do you feel bad, Polly?"

"Nowhere, Aunt Miranda. I'm just a little tired. Maybe it's because the quails have gone. I think I'll be all right in a couple of days. Yes, Aunt Miranda, I'm sure I will."

Mrs. Baldwin watched her with anxious eyes, and wondered if she was "coming down" with something—measles, whooping-cough, mumps, or chicken-pox. Had Polly been through any of these children's diseases?

"Oh, yes, Aunt Miranda, I had the measles at the Home. We all had them

together, and oh, such a lovely time! Tinker had them first, and then Jennie and then Bennie and then me. I had them the lightest of all. Mrs. Wilson said she hardly knew whether I had the measles or just an attack of indigestion. But I knew that I had them, for I itched all over, and so hot—why, Aunt Miranda, it was just like summer in winter, I was so warm. Don't you think for sure they were the measles?"

"Yes, dear, I reckon you had them. Well, I'm glad that you don't have to have them again."

Polly wasn't threatened with any disease; she was never physically healthier in her life, but she secretly grieved at the punishment which she had to inflict upon Dick, and kept counting the minutes and hours that would elapse before she could once more give the quail call. Often during these dreary days she would nearly forget herself, and would pucker her lips to whistle, catch-

ing herself just in time, and clapping her hands over her mouth lest a sound should escape.

Dick, too, was silent; this piqued her a little, for she had not placed any injunction upon his sounding the call. Perhaps he was angry with her, and would not renew the old clandestine communication when the time was up. She thought that he might at least call once a day just to let her know he was well.

"Maybe he thought I didn't want him to whistle, either," she said to herself. "But I wouldn't be so mean as that. I wish he'd whistle just once—a tiny little whistle."

But Dick was as silent as she. The fields and woods never once echoed to the call of the quail, and as the days passed, Polly grew anxious and excited. On the evening of the sixth day she was almost feverish with anxiety, and she could barely sleep at all that night.

Bright and early on the seventh day she was up and afield, a new light in her face, and her spirits bubbling with happiness. This was the day when she could once more whistle the call. Wouldn't Uncle Jethro be surprised to hear the quails calling back and forth in his fields again?

Before she was barely out of the garden, she puckered her little mouth.

"Maybe I've forgotten how to do it," she mused with a laugh.

But a moment later a clear, shrill "Bob White" went trilling across the fields on the still morning air. A moment later she began to repeat it, whistling now softly, now loudly, as she walked along. There was no response from the woods, possibly because Dick had not yet heard the joyful sound, or because he was not yet up and through with his breakfast.

Polly kept up an intermittent call of the quail for nearly an hour, but Dick made no response. At first she was surprised,

then she felt hurt, and as she continued the call without any signal from him, she became genuinely distressed. Was Dick going to punish her by refusing to answer? She sat down under the shade of the trees, and tried to reason it out in her little mind. Was this just an exhibition of Dick's temper, or did he really think he had good reasons for not responding to the call?

At noon Polly returned to the house a little tired and unhappy. Dick had not once whistled the call, and she couldn't understand it. Late in the afternoon she repeated the whistle at intervals. Jethro, passing her once, said:

"Trying to call the quails back, Polly? Well, they don't seem to come, do they?"

"No, Uncle Jethro, but I think they will soon."

But come back they did not. Polly tried in every possible way to elicit a response, but the fields and woods were silent except for the echo of her own whistle. For three

days she repeated the call, now from the thick hedge side, now from the shady depths of the woods, and now from the very end of the snake fence; she varied the call from soft, plaintive notes to harsh and shrill cries, and then trilled a high crescendo that carried a long distance through the soft air. But Dick was silent; and on the third day Polly went home in despair. She had been deserted by her only playmate. Dick was taking an unfair and cruel advantage of her; he was punishing her more than she deserved.

She was so still and apathetic on the fourth day that Miranda and Jethro watched her with concern. She would sit for a long time with her doll and not speak to it; or she would rock it gently back and forth without apparent consciousness of its presence in her arms. Her usual spirits and enthusiasm were missed in the house, and Miranda shook her head in dismay.

"She's sick, Jethro," asserted Mrs. Baldwin, "and needs a sort of tonic. You get me some burdock-root and dandelions, and I'll brew her a herb tonic."

Jethro shook his head as if he had his doubts about the virtue of such a concoction, but he obediently made the necessary collection of roots. Miranda added some sassafras root and wintergreens, and the aromatic fumes of the boiling mixture were enough to stimulate the appetite of the most jaded. Polly sniffed the odor from the kitchen, and showed her first real interest in the proceedings.

"Is it for me, Aunt Miranda?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, it's home-made root-beer, and you must drink a lot of it. It's good for you."

"Oh, I just love root-beer! Can I drink all I want of it—barrels and barrels? I never had enough root-beer in my life."

"I reckon you can," replied Jethro, "and

I'm going to help you drink it. Miranda makes fine root-beer. My, I can almost taste it now!"

He smacked his lips, and Polly laughed and clapped her hands with glee. That night she went to bed feeling livelier than she had all day, for in the morning the savory drink would be ready, and the anticipation of this lifted the load temporarily from her spirits.

Miranda had strained the boiling liquid, measured the yeast, and after the beer had cooled, poured it into stone bottles to "work." By morning it had fermented a little, and the white froth on the top, speckled with the sediment from the roots and herbs, gave it a tempting appearance. It was root-beer that was as grateful to the palate as it was effective in stimulating the system and purifying the blood.

Polly tasted it and smacked her lips.

"Oh," with a little gasp of appreciation, "isn't it good! I believe I could drink it

all day. I didn't know you could make such wonderful root-beer, Aunt Miranda."

Jethro took a long drink of the amber tonic, and remarked, "I reckon that's almost as good as city root-beer. Ain't it, Polly?"

"Better, Uncle Jethro," gulp, "a hundred times better," another gulp, "a thousand times—yes, a million times better."

They were standing near the back porch under an arbor of honeysuckle, Polly and Jethro sampling the root-beer, and Miranda pouring it for them out of the stone bottle into little tin dippers. The road in front of the farmhouse took a sharp curve near the fruit orchard, affording them a glimpse of the highway for some distance, as it wound among the fields and meadows, so they could see from their position in the arbor any carriage or pedestrian before either reached the foot of the hill to begin the ascent.

But Jethro and Miranda were so in-

terested in watching Polly's first taste of real home-made root-beer that they did not notice the solitary woman trudging heavily and reluctantly along the dusty highway. She was dressed in black, and walked like one performing some unwilling errand. Once or twice she stopped and glanced anxiously at the Baldwin farm. Her hesitancy increased when she reached a point where she could get a glimpse of the group assembled under the arbor. Polly's clear piping voice must have reached her ears, however, for she straightened her shoulders, and seemed to gain new courage and strength from the sound.

The front gate was unlatched, and the woman entered the yard without disturbing any of the revellers drinking their root-beer. Once more she paused, gasped a little, and dropped on the lower step of the front porch. There she sat for a time, huddled in a heap, the picture of misery.

Some noise at the front of the house, or

perhaps intuition—it may have been either or both—caused Miranda to peer round the side of the house. Seeing the woman seated on the step, she stopped and looked at the intruder in stupefied amazement. The woman returned the stare with a look in which there was neither surprise nor fear. The eyes were dark and sullen with pain.

Miranda's first impulse was to retreat without speaking, but she realized its futility when she saw Jethro and Polly approaching from behind.

"What is it, Miranda?" Jethro asked as he saw the strange expression in his wife's face. "Anybody there?"

Catching sight of the drooping figure on the porch step, he opened his eyes wide in surprise and shut his teeth with a click.

"You—you here, Mary Edward?" he gasped.

The forlorn figure rose and faced them.

"Yes, Jethro, I reckon I am," she replied; then apparently lost for further

words, she remained silent, moistening her lips with her tongue, and swaying slightly.

Polly pushed her way between her uncle and aunt. She waited anxiously for them to speak; the voice was unknown to her, and she mutely appealed for an introduction.

"Miranda Baldwin," the mother of little Dick Edward began finally, and once more stopped to moisten her lips.

"Miranda," she continued, after another pause, "and Jethro, I'm in trouble."

Miranda's eyes did not soften; she faced the woman with hard, set features, and made no response.

"In trouble, Mary?" Jethro queried. "What's the matter?"

"It—it's Dick," was the faint reply. "He's sick and likely to die."

Her face quivered, and her head drooped as she spoke. Polly caught these words, and gave a start of surprise.

"Is it Dick—Dick Edward?" she de-

POLLY PUSHED HER WAY BETWEEN HER UNCLE AND AUNT.—*Page 194.*

manded of Miranda. "Oh, Aunt Miranda, and he's sick—going to die?"

"Hush, dear!" cautioned her aunt.

"Yes, child, he's very sick," Mary Edward quavered, "and he may die. The doctor says he can't cure him unless—unless ——"

She stopped from sheer emotion, and sobbed quietly.

"Miranda Baldwin," she spoke again, now facing the group with flashing eyes, "you got a grudge against me, and I ain't saying I don't deserve it. But you 'ain't got the heart to punish my little Dick for the sake of his mother. He's all I got, Miranda. Since Sam's death he's been everything to me. I've humored him and spoilt him, some say, but it was because he was all I had. And now he's likely to be took from me. If he is, I can't stand it—I can't stand it!"

She broke down, and sobbed convulsively. Unable to see another in tears,

Jethro advanced to her side, and said soothingly :

"There, there, Mary! maybe it ain't as bad as it looks. What can we do for Dick?"

"I only ask a little thing," she replied after another sob or two. "I—I want Polly."

Miranda started forward as if electrified.

"Want Polly?" she gasped in consternation.

"Yes—that is, Dick does. He's calling for her all the time—whistling for her. He says she'd come, if she could hear his call of the quail. Oh, it's breaking my heart to deny him! And this his last wish!"

The long pause which followed rent the heart of each,—the mother, who was appealing for her dying child, Polly, who was shaken by the news of Dick's illness, and Jethro and Miranda, who were struggling between their increasing sympathy and the bitterness of the past.

"Miranda," appealed Mrs. Edward, "for the sake of Dick, let bygones be bygones. Sam and I thought we were right, and you and Jethro in the wrong; but that's neither here nor there now. We said bitter things about each other, and Sam died sorrowful that we had made enemies of our friends. He asked me to make up with you when he died. But I couldn't then. I was bitter against you; I had lost my husband, and you had yours with you. I had Dick, but he was a cripple, and my heart turned to him. I said you'd helped to send his father to the grave. Yes—I said that, but I was wild with grief—and Dick was a cripple. I hardly knew what I said. I could not repeat the things now. But others could, and they told you, and I was too proud to take them back.

"Miranda," continued the sorrowing woman, approaching nearer, and stretching forth her hands beseechingly, "won't you forget? Won't you let Polly come to

Dick? It may save his life. He's calling for her all the time. He's never had a playmate but Polly. She's been good to him, and ——"

Miranda Baldwin's face contracted. Jethro furtively wiped his eyes, looked askance at his wife and then at the woman appealing for her child.

"Oh, Aunt Miranda," cried Polly, suddenly throwing her arms about her aunt, "I must go to Dick. You will let me, won't you? He may die, and that would be awful! I've been whistling for him for days and days, and he didn't answer. I thought maybe he was angry with me, and ——"

"Polly," interrupted Aunt Miranda, looking at her severely, "have you been playing with Dick after I told you not to?"

"No, Aunt Miranda, only that one day when I said good-bye, but we called to each other by whistling. Uncle Jethro's flock of quails was only Dick and me whistling

to each other. I thought that wouldn't be wrong. Was it, Aunt Miranda? I never played with him or spoke to him—only once after that."

She stopped for a moment confused, and then continued :

"He asked me to play with him one day, and when I wouldn't, he stole my dolly, and wouldn't give it up unless I promised to play with him. I told him I wouldn't, and that I wouldn't answer his whistle for —for as many days as I counted. And he let me count six—six whole days, Aunt Miranda. It was terribly hard not to, but I didn't, and then when I whistled again, he wouldn't answer. I thought he was angry with me, and—and poor Dick, he was sick!"

The simple recital of the story affected all three listeners, and Jethro had to clear his throat before he could speak.

"I reckon, Miranda, we'd better let her go to Dick."

"Oh, may I, Aunt Miranda?" Polly pleaded.

Mrs. Baldwin's face underwent a swift change; she leaned over suddenly, and kissed Polly on the lips.

"Yes, dear, you can go."

Then she turned quietly, and walked into the house.

"God bless you, Polly!" murmured Dick's mother thickly.

"I reckon I'll go with you, Polly," Jethro said. "I'll tell Miranda."

CHAPTER TWELVE

DICK was really very sick, tossing on his bed with a fever. Through his dreams there always appeared the face of Polly. The doctor had given up all hopes for recovery on the seventh day, for the boy was naturally weak, and his crippled back and legs added to the difficulties of the case. The boy was declining rapidly without any cause apparent except that nature refused to come to his assistance in the battle for life.

He failed to recognize Polly when she appeared. Perhaps it was a blessing that she could not see his wild, feverish eyes, but she could hear him as he tossed on the bed and murmured in delirium:

"Why can't you play with me, Polly? Just play with me this once."

After a while he would add: "You didn't whistle to-day, Polly. Why didn't you? No, no, don't call me Tinker again! I'll be good—very good!"

Every now and then he would pucker his lips, and try to imitate the whistle of a quail. Sometimes it was only a faint lisp; at others it was sharp and shrill.

Polly, a little awed and frightened at first by her surroundings, took Dick's hands in hers and patted them.

"Oh, Dick, I'm going to whistle to you now," she told him. "And maybe I can play with you. Think of that, Dick! We'll play together every day. You must hurry and get well again. You won't die, will you, Dick? I think it's terrible to die, and leave me alone."

Jethro and Mrs. Edward stood back of the bed and watched them. Polly's cool hand seemed to act like magic on the boy; he grew less restless, and finally dropped into a real sleep. Polly remained by his

side, talking softly to him, and smoothing his feverish brow.

While the boy was asleep the outside door opened, and Miranda Baldwin entered on tiptoe. She had been communing with herself in the privacy of her own room. Now her eyes were moist and red. A gentle, contented expression transfigured the withered face.

"How is Dick?" she inquired gently.

"He's sleeping, Miranda," replied Jethro. "I think he's improving."

"Here's some chicken broth for him, Mary," she said. "Maybe he can take it later. It's real nourishing."

Mary Edward accepted the proffered bowl of broth with wondering eyes.

"Miranda, won't you sit down?" she asked, moving a chair near the bed.

"I think I will. I feel all tuckered out."

With Polly Miranda watched by the bedside of the patient for nearly two hours. When the boy finally opened his eyes

again, it was Polly and Miranda he first saw. There was a look of wonder and uncertainty in his eyes; he had awakened from a long, feverish dream in which strange visions had haunted him.

If Polly could have seen, she would have realized instantly that the crisis had passed; but only Dick's voice informed her of the change.

"Polly," he whispered, "did you hear the quails whistle?"

"Yes, Dick," she answered happily, "I heard them, and knew it was you. Now, Dick, you're going to get better. You must hurry up, so we can go out and whistle again. I've been calling you for ever and ever so many days, and you didn't answer. Can you whistle now, Dick?"

The boy puckered up his lips, and made a faint effort at it, but shook his head sadly.

"You do it for me, Polly."

Polly's whistle filled the room with its

POLLY'S WHISTLE FILLED THE ROOM.—*Page 204.*

shrill echo; it seemed as if a "Bob White" had suddenly dropped down in their midst and was calling for its mate.

Dick smiled, and raised his hands to clap.

"Do it again, Polly," he murmured.

And Polly repeated it as often as he requested it.

"Now I think you'd better sleep, Dick," she said finally, "and have pleasant dreams. I wonder what you dream of. Do you shut your eyes, and see big hobgoblins and water-witches and giants?"

"What are water-witches, Polly?" Dick asked, his big, wondering eyes turned on her.

"Why," stammered Polly, "don't you know? I think they must be witches that live under the water, and come out at night-time to get a breath of fresh air. They must be dreadfully wet and cold, and I shouldn't wonder if they sneezed whenever they came out."

"Did you ever see one, Polly?"

"I don't think I did," confessed the little girl slowly, "but I've imagined I did, and that's 'most as good as seeing one really and truly. Don't you think so? Now just close your eyes tight and say, 'Water-witch! Water-witch! What are you like?' Then you'll see one,—long, green and shiny,—rise up out of the darkness, and say, 'I'm like my mother, little boy, and my mother was like her mother, and her mother's mother was like her mother's mother. Now what am I like?'"

"Then what?" gasped Dick, as Polly stopped.

"Then," gravely, "I think she'll say good-night, and drop back in the water. Now you must be a good boy and go to sleep with the water-witch."

Dick smiled, and tried to close his eyes, but he held faithfully to the hand resting in one of his. For a long time the soft ticking of the clock was the only sound

that broke the stillness. When Polly stirred and extricated her hand from Dick's he was slumbering quietly and breathing normally.

Polly rose from her chair, and Miranda took her by the hand, and led her out of the sick chamber. Jethro followed them, walking clumsily, and making a great effort not to knock his toes against chairs and bureaus. Once outside the room he breathed the first long breath he had drawn in an hour.

"Polly," he said, "I think you've saved him. I reckon he's going to get well, after all."

Mary Edward suddenly enveloped the girl in two strong motherly arms, and kissed her. Her voice caught a little as she tried to speak.

"My dear, how can I thank you," she murmured in half sobs. "You've saved my boy's life, and you —— Oh, Polly! Polly!"

Miranda took the sobbing woman by the arm, and led her gently to a chair.

"There, Mary," she soothed, "don't take on so. Dick will get better. I'm thankful Polly came—and that you—you came after her."

The little sobs and gasps grew gradually quieter, and the shaking form steadied itself. When Mary looked up she was dry-eyed.

"Miranda," she asked slowly, "is this for all time, or only while Dick is sick? Are you going to hold that old grudge against me, or let bygones be bygones?"

Miranda's lips twitched uncertainly, but only for a brief moment; she had fought out the fight alone in the silence of her room. A smile overspread her face, making it beautiful in its silvery setting. Had Polly seen her then, she would have declared that it was a "heavenly" face.

"Mary, I never did think you were in your right mind when you said them

things," Miranda replied sweetly. "Now we won't say nothing more about the old quarrel."

Mary grasped her hand, and gave a little sob of happiness. Jethro, standing by, screwed up his face, and observed:

"I reckon now ——"

But he didn't get any farther, for Miranda interrupted:

"I declare, Mary, that patch-quilt you started on my birthday 'ain't been finished yet. You must bring it right over to the house, and I'll help you with it. I been saving up some of Jethro's old neckties, and they'd do right well to patch out this corner."

She held up a half-finished quilt, and began fingering it lovingly.

"It does beat all how time flies," she continued. "I remember just as well as if 'twas yesterday when you started this. That blue silk was from Aunt Lindy's dress she sent me, and this red one was Sam's old

necktie. You remember when we bought it for him, Mary, down at Woodbine? He laughed, and said he'd never wore red before, but he guessed he could stand it if the ladies could."

Miranda chuckled as she recalled these happenings, and Mary's face brightened and softened at the memory.

"And that yellow silk was from Jethro's handkerchief," said Miranda, pointing to one of the squares in the quilt. "You remember that yellow silk handkerchief he got at the church fair? He drew it as a prize, and all the girls wanted to go home with him so he wouldn't lose it. I guess some of them thought he'd give it to them."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed Jethro. "I always wondered what had become of that yellow silk. Miranda must have stolen it away from me when I was asleep. And I gave it to her for keeps."

Polly, who had stood quietly listening,

stretched forth a hand and felt of the quilt's silken surface.

"I wonder which is Uncle Jethro's yellow silk handkerchief," she mused. "I think it must be this; it's so soft and smooth. Is it, Uncle Jethro?"

"No, Polly, you didn't guess right that time," Jethro replied. "If I remember rightly, that was Tom Baker's. He was sweet on your Aunt Miranda, and he must have given her this."

"Jethro!" exclaimed Miranda sharply.

Jethro chuckled, and refused to accept the rebuke.

"Yes, Polly," he continued, "your Aunt Miranda was quite a belle in those days, and she had the pick of all the young fellows. Why she took me has always been a mystery. I can't account for it nohow."

Miranda frowned this time without speaking, although Jethro was not looking at her. But the two pink spots glowing

in her cheeks were not caused by displeasure.

"Oh, I know," Polly exclaimed. "I know why she took you, Uncle Jethro."

"You do, Polly? Well, I'd like to know if you can tell me."

"Because," replied Polly, throwing her arms round his neck, "because you're always so kind and good to her. I'd take you myself, if Aunt Miranda hadn't been ahead of me."

"Well, do hear that, now! Listen to that! Polly, you and your Aunt Miranda will spoil me yet—yes, you will!"

But Polly snuggled closer to him, and by her caressing actions gave every evidence that she didn't consider spoiling him even a remote possibility. Miranda studied the patterns of the crazy patch-quilt, and as each square recalled some incident of the past, her eyes grew soft and moist with crowding memories. These half happy, half bitter recollections overwhelmed her so that her

hands trembled, and her heart beat unsteadily; but her soul was at peace, for bygones were no longer to blot out to-day's sunshine.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

POLLY proved a better physician than the country doctor who had been patiently watching little Dick for days, administering all the remedies known to his limited science. It was discomfort of mind more than physical suffering and pain that was responsible for Dick's sickness. A lonely and morbid lad, shut in by his physical deformities, he had taken Polly's punishment so to heart that he had fallen sick, and seemed likely to fade and die like a neglected flower.

The presence of the girl at his bedside for the next few days worked wonders with him; it was a magic cure whose efficacy was far greater than all drugs and medicines. He grew stronger as rapidly as he had weakened; within three days he was

able to sit up in bed, and on the sixth day Polly wheeled him outdoors in the sunshine.

Polly now spent her days almost equally divided between Dick's home and her own. A long unused path across the fields that had become overgrown with briers and weeds during the years of discord between the two families, was beaten once more to a hard firm surface. Jethro and Miranda showed Polly this old disused short-cut, and the girl memorized its different windings and twistings, until she could traverse it with amazing swiftness. It followed the snake fence for half its distance, then turned sharply and crossed the wood-lot, and finally debouched upon the highway opposite Dick's home. During the following week, almost any morning bright and early one could see a fair-haired girl flying along this path, carrying some delicacy for the crippled boy, and eagerly sniffing at the flowers, or whistling the morning call of "Bob White."

And if one listened carefully, he could hear the echo of the call from somewhere beyond the woods; a sharp, resonant whistle that might easily be mistaken for the cheerful answer of the bird's mate concealed in the underbrush of the orchard or woods. For with returning health and strength, Dick's whistle came back to him, and he could imitate the quail as perfectly and loudly as Polly.

Jethro, working in the hot fields, would often stop and listen to "Bob White"; sometimes it puzzled him to know whether it was a flock of quails roosting near the woods, or Polly and Dick calling to each other.

"I declare, Polly, I don't know whether you're a bird or not," he told her one day. "I reckon you'll be flying away some day and leaving us."

"Don't you wish I was a bird, Uncle Jethro?" she asked. "I think I should like to be able to fly. It must be like angels to have wings."

"Well, Polly, I don't want you to be an angel yet," Uncle Jethro replied, shaking his head. "You'd be getting tired of me and your Aunt Miranda if you had wings. No, we want you just a little girl. But how's Dick getting along?"

"He's coming over to the house to-day, Uncle Jethro. I'm going to wheel him."

"Well, well, think of Dick coming to visit us! It must be ten years since he was here, and he only a little baby then. I guess Aunt Miranda will be glad to see him."

With his mother Dick spent the day with Aunt Miranda, and while the two children played in the yard and garden, Mary and Miranda talked fast to make up for the long blank space in their lives. There were a thousand and one things to discuss, reminiscences to exchange, village gossip of a decade ago to rehearse, broken threads to pick up and piece together,—all the little experiences which make up life to renew and live over again.

The visits back and forth became almost daily occurrences. Polly and Dick were no closer in their attachment than Miranda and Mary, for in their early days they had been fast friends and almost constantly together. They seemed to renew their old intimacy unconsciously, drifting back to the period before the quarrel as if the intervening years had never been. Jethro watching them conversing as of old remarked to himself:

"I reckon they'll catch up yet. Ten years of talk ain't nothing for women folks, but I guess it's a pretty big-size job for a man. Maybe it's just as well Sam's dead; we could never do it."

And Jethro sighed, as if his number of years were weighing on him.

A week after Dick's recovery Jethro drove to Woodbine, and returned with a letter from the orphan asylum. The unusual and exciting events of the week had completely driven out of his mind all

thoughts of the impending difficulties in keeping Polly. That there had been no immediate answer to his letter he did not consider strange, but accepted it as definite assurance there would be no further trouble.

The letter which he received now from the post-office—three days late, as he noticed by the postmark, because of his failure to call for the mail—once more disturbed his peace of mind, and sent him home in quicker time than Billy had ever covered the distance before. He could barely wait to stable Billy before calling his wife into consultation.

"Miranda," he inquired anxiously, "what do you make of this? Superintendent Wilson is coming down here himself to see us about Polly. Now what do you suppose he wants?"

Miranda's eyes opened wide with surprise and fear. She clutched at the letter and read it through herself. There was nothing to read between the lines. It was a

brief and formal typewritten letter, informing them that the writer would be at Woodbine on the tenth to see them about the case of Polly Walters.

"Why, Jethro!" Miranda exclaimed. "Land o' goodness, to-day's the tenth!"

"So it is," murmured Jethro, consulting the calendar. "Then—then he may be here any time."

Miranda stared aghast at her husband with the old fear of losing Polly clutching at her heart. She had a thousand times more reasons now to hold the little girl; to take her away from them after she had been instrumental in uniting the two families would be like tearing apart the whole home.

"Where's Polly?" Jethro asked after a long pause.

"Over at Mary's with Dick."

"Well, maybe it's just as well she ain't here. We can talk to Superintendent Wilson better without her."

"Do you suppose he—he wants to take her away?" stammered Miranda.

"Well, I reckon he won't!"

Miranda clicked her teeth, showing that she, too, would not permit any such inconceivable outrage. It was now nearly four o'clock, and the early afternoon train arrived at Woodbine shortly after three. Any minute the stage might drive up and deposit their unwelcome guest at their door.

Miranda, with her hospitality coming to her rescue, bustled inside to "fix things up a bit" for the visitor, and her housewifely activity kept her mind from dwelling upon the question. Jethro, on the other hand, with no such emergency work to perform, wandered nervously from the house to the barn and back again, peering anxiously down the road, and grumbling softly to himself.

"I guess they 'ain't got no right to do it," he murmured. "No, they 'ain't. Polly's

here, and here she'll stay. I reckon they'll let her remain."

But he was far from convincing himself by this species of logic. Over and over again he rehearsed the little speech he intended to make—a sort of ultimatum that could not be defied ; and then when the stage did appear in a cloud of dust, bearing the visitor to the farmhouse, every word of Jethro's carefully prepared address fled, and he approached to meet Superintendent Wilson in a mental panic.

"Mr. Jethro Baldwin?" the well-dressed, smiling stranger inquired, as he got out of the stage.

"Yes, sir. That's my name," Jethro replied weakly.

"I'm Superintendent Wilson. You received my letter, I suppose?"

"Yes, I got it."

Jethro's usual hospitable manners deserted him. He stood and stared at the man, and made no move to extend a wel-

come. He even forgot to invite Mr. Wilson inside the gate. The stage rumbled away, leaving the two men standing there. The stranger glanced up at the house and garden, and half apologetically said:

"Your wife at home?"

"Miranda? Yes, she's at home."

"And little Polly; is she here?"

"No, Polly ain't here."

Mr. Wilson raised his eyebrows, and glanced quizzically at Jethro.

"She's living with you, isn't she?" he asked finally.

"Yes, Polly's living with us, but she's away to-day—over playing with Dick."

"Oh," showing some relief, "I didn't understand at first. Is that your wife? Yes, of course, it must be."

He advanced easily along the gravel path, and met Miranda, who stood on the porch facing him with even less welcome in her eyes than Jethro had shown. She was distinctly aggressive in her attitude, and

Mr. Wilson read her feelings in every line of her face and eyes.

"You have a beautiful place here, Mrs. Baldwin," he said easily, ignoring her defiant attitude. "The country is so attractive at this time of the year. How are crops this season?" turning to address Jethro.

"Fair to middling."

"I used to live on a farm," the visitor continued, "and I've always regretted that I left it. It's my ambition to get back to it some day. It's the only real place to live to enjoy life."

Miranda, without a word, moved back stiffly, and proffered him a chair on the porch; she could not extend an invitation to enter her home until she knew his mission.

"Thank you," he said, accepting the chair and removing his hat.

Jethro took a seat on the lower step and continued to chew a straw as if his life depended upon it. Miranda stood in an un-

bending attitude of hostility. The visitor glanced from one to the other, and a smile flickered across his face. Perhaps he accepted their attitude as one of embarrassment and not of sullen enmity.

"I came down here to see you about Polly," he began finally, plunging directly into the subject uppermost in all their minds. "It was a curious and inexplicable mistake we made. I don't see how it could have happened."

"Mistake or no mistake, I'm glad you made it," declared Miranda.

"Why?" in surprise and amazement.

"Because, I reckon, we wouldn't have Polly if the other girl had come."

"No, I suppose not," smilingly, "but it would have saved all of us this trouble."

"It 'ain't been no trouble to us," blurted Miranda.

"I'm glad to hear that. I thought perhaps Polly, being blind, would cause you a good deal of annoyance and ——"

"Annoyance? Humph!" snorted Miranda.

Then with arms akimbo she faced the man, and spoke without embarrassment, but with unmistakable hostility in every tone and word.

"Don't speak of Polly that way! She don't give trouble or annoyance to any one! I won't listen to any one who says she does! Annoyance! Humph!"

Superintendent Wilson sat back, and looked at the speaker in silence; the cool, unwelcome attitude of his host and hostess was puzzling him.

"I take it, then," he ventured after a pause, "that you like her."

"Like her?" repeated Miranda. "I reckon that ain't the fit word. We love her, and she ain't going to leave us. If you've come down here to take her away, you may's well turn around and go back. She ain't going away with you—not even if you get the law on us."

THEN WITH ARMS AKIMBO SHE FACED THE MAN.—*Page 226.*

"But——" stammered the vistor, considerably taken back by this abrupt defiance. "But, in my capacity of superintendent of the asylum, I must——"

"I don't care what capacity you come in," interrupted Miranda. "She ain't going!"

"But——" began the superintendent again, frowning visibly at the belligerent attitude of the speaker.

This time he was interrupted by a commotion round the corner of the house. Approaching footsteps caused all three to turn in that direction. Polly appeared running with a bunch of wild flowers in one hand and her doll in the other.

"Aunt Miranda," she called, "where are you?"

"Here, dear, right here," and Miranda, with a quick side step, caught Polly in her arms.

"Is Uncle Jethro here, too?" the girl asked, kissing her aunt.

"Yes, Polly, I'm right here," Jethro replied.

"I've had such a lovely time with Dick," Polly cried. "We found a hole in the old apple-tree, and what do you think is at the bottom of it? Guess! Owls! Little, tiny, fluffy owls, with big claws and bills, and they couldn't see in the sunlight any more than I can. Dick says they can see in the night-time, but not in the sunlight."

"Polly," Miranda said, when the girl stopped, "there's somebody here you know."

"Somebody? Who? Where?"

She turned her sightless eyes from one direction to another, as if to sense the newcomer by some power greater than that of sight.

"Polly," prompted Mr. Wilson gently, "I wonder if you've forgotten my voice."

The girl started, hesitated a moment, and then with a little glad cry exclaimed:

"Oh, it must be Mr. Wilson. It is Mr. Wilson."

She extended her hand and finally caught his.

"I'm so glad to meet you again, Mr. Wilson," she said in her little formal way. "And how's Mrs. Wilson?"

"Very well, thank you, Polly. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you."

Then feeling that the formal part of the greeting had been sufficiently carried out, she became impulsive, enthusiastic Polly again.

"Oh, isn't it lovely to have you here, Mr. Wilson! I wish Mrs. Wilson could be here, too. I wonder if she won't come some day and see how happy I am. Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro are so good to me, and Dick is so nice! We're building a playhouse for Dolly, and maybe it will be big enough for us to get in. Dick knows how to build houses out of twigs and sticks, and I help him. I'm learning how."

"You like your home, Polly?" asked Mr. Wilson.

"Oh, I love it! It's just heavenly!"

"You don't want to go back?"

"Go back?"

An expression of terror crept into her face, and instinctively she reached out and caught Miranda's hand.

"Go back?" she repeated. "Oh, Aunt Miranda, have you got tired of me, and want to send me back?"

The little voice caught, but before it could break, Mrs. Baldwin had her in her arms, loving and kissing her.

"Go back, Polly!" laughed her aunt. "No, dear, you shall never go back. You're my little girl, and you're always going to stay with me. Nobody shall ever take you away—no, nobody!"

She gave the child a fierce hug. Polly stirred in her embrace, and sighed happily.

"And Uncle Jethro?" she murmured. "Does he want me to go back?"

"Polly!" shouted Jethro, leaping to his feet, "don't ask that! You know I wouldn't let any one drag you away."

"Yes, Uncle Jethro, I know it," she replied with a contented smile.

Superintendent Wilson rose from his seat.

"I think," he announced smilingly, "that my mission here is ended. I have no intention of taking Polly away from you, but it was my duty to find out what kind of a home she had, and if she was treated right. I don't need to ask any more. Polly has shown me.

"Well, Polly," he continued after a pause, "I'm glad for your sake you've found a good aunt and uncle. I hope they'll prove as good to you always, as I know they are now."

Turning to Jethro and Miranda he said:

"You have a wonderful girl in Polly. She was a favorite at the Home, and we all loved her. Maybe the mistake, after all, was for the best. Yes, I think it was."

"I reckon it was," agreed Jethro suddenly recovering his voice. "I took a notion to Polly the first time I laid eyes on her, and I wouldn't let her go now for anything."

Mr. Wilson turned as if to leave, and glanced at his watch.

"What time is the next train?" he asked.

"You ain't going back to the city tonight," Miranda exclaimed. "Land sakes, we 'ain't asked you in! You just take his hat, Jethro, and I'll hurry up supper. You got to spend the night with us."

"I don't know about that," protested Mr. Wilson. "I should be back in the city tonight."

"Well, you can't go," replied Miranda in her most hospitable way. "Polly, you just tell him he must stay. Will you?"

"Please, Mr. Wilson, stay, won't you? I want to hear about Mrs. Wilson and Tinker and Maggie and all the other children. Won't you stay all night?"

The man wavered between duty and inclination : the surroundings were certainly pleasant and enticing, with the flowers abloom, and the trees whispering sweetly as the warm wind stirred their foliage ; and there was no question now about the hospitality extended to him. Jethro and Miranda were now as anxious to make him feel at home as they had been hostile and disagreeable before.

" Who can resist you, Polly ? " said Mr. Wilson at last. " Yes, I'll stay, and gladly tell you all I know about what's happened at the Home since you left."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JETHRO was tugging and hauling at a refractory trace, while Billy phlegmatically eyed him, and refused to budge an inch to make the operation easier.

"Back up, Billy!" shouted Jethro. "Back! Whoa! What in tarnation's the matter with you, Billy? You're getting lazier every day. There now, stand still!"

Miranda, waiting for the wagon, flustered round, and called to him, "Jethro, ain't you never going to get ready? My, it's 'most time for the train now!"

"I reckon we'll get there before it comes," calmly replied her husband. "Be the children ready?"

"I'll have Polly and Dick out in a minute. Mr. Wilson is talking to them. He's got such taking ways with children. Dick

thinks 'most as much of him as Polly does. I guess he must be a real nice man."

Dick had been brought over early in the morning, and the two children were to accompany Superintendent Wilson to his train. Perhaps it was the sight of his load that made Billy sigh and refuse to budge unless prodded by Jethro.

Before Jethro had completed the operation of harnessing, Mr. Wilson appeared at the barn; he was interested in horses and everything that pertained to the farm. He patted Billy on the neck, and rubbed his nose.

"How old is Billy?" he asked, opening the horse's mouth to examine his teeth.

"Nigh on to twelve years," responded Jethro. "He ain't as spry as he used to be—a little stiff in the fore legs. But he's good for a few more years, I reckon."

Mr. Wilson finished his examination of the worn teeth and wiped his hands on the green grass.

"You never had any children, Mr. Baldwin, did you?" he asked suddenly.

"No," replied Jethro, a little surprised, "not until we got Polly. Maybe it's just as well. Children of your own ain't all that you expect. There's Tom Baker's girl, she gives him a lot of trouble; and Bill Sims's boy, they say, is getting wild. Bringing up children's like raising colts; you can never tell whether they're going to be sound and whole or not. It ain't always the blood; it's the bringing 'em up. It's easier to spoil a child than a horse."

"You expect to spoil Polly then?" asked Mr. Wilson with a smile.

"Polly? You couldn't spoil her. She's already brung up, and there's good blood in her. She's a thoroughbred."

"Yes, I quite agree with you, although I don't know much about her parents."

"They're both dead?" queried Jethro, interested.

"Yes, she has neither father nor mother."

"Poor little thing!"

"Yes, it is hard on a child not to have any parent. I suppose Polly feels it more than most children."

"Poor little thing, I wish ——"

"No, you don't wish any such thing," interrupted Mr. Wilson, laughing, "for if she did, you wouldn't have her."

"That's so; I reckon I'm selfish enough to feel that way."

"Still, Polly would appreciate calling some one father or mother."

"You think so?" holding a rein loosely in one hand, as he stared at the speaker.

"Every child feels that way."

Jethro removed his hat, and wiped his brow.

"Polly's different from most girls; she—she ——"

As Jethro's voice trailed off into inarticulateness, Mr. Wilson slapped Billy on the neck, and said:

"I've always hoped that Polly would find a father and mother—not real blood ones, of course, but adopted parents. She'd appreciate them, and prove worthy."

Jethro stared hard at him, his eyes winking and blinking.

"You mean," he stammered, "that—that we could adopt her?"

"Why not? Don't you care for her enough to make her your daughter?"

"Care for her? Well, I guess —— Wait; I'll talk to Miranda."

He dropped the reins suddenly and hurried out of the barn.

"Miranda! Miranda!" he shouted.

His wife, anticipating some trouble, hurried to his side.

"What in goodness' sake is the matter, Jethro?" she gasped, out of breath. "Has anything happened?"

"Yes, Miranda, a lot has happened! Mr. Wilson wants us to adopt Polly as our own child. He says she'd be our own daugh-

ter then, and we—we'd be her father and mother. She—she—well, I reckon I must have been a fool not to have thought of it before. Why, Polly would be ——"

Miranda turned from Jethro to the superintendent. Her face was flushed with excitement and surprise.

"You mean," she began, "that Polly would be our own child, and nobody could take her away—never?"

"Yes, Mrs. Baldwin, she'd be legally adopted by you, and no one else would have any right to her."

"Not if—if her own parents should ——"

"They're both dead."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes, positive. We have a record of all the children who come to the Home."

"But would Polly like it?" she stammered, looking from the superintendent to Jethro.

"Ask her."

"Ask Polly? She—she might not ——"

"Let me call her," the superintendent replied, quietly.

Polly responded promptly, hurrying to the barn with both hands full of grass she had pulled to feed Billy.

"Polly," Mr. Wilson said, "how would you like to exchange your Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda for a father and mother?"

The happy little face flushed, and then turned very pale.

"*Father* and *mother*!" she cried. "I thought they were dead, Mr. Wilson."

"Yes, Polly, they are, but you could get new ones. If Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin should adopt you, they would be your father and mother. Would you like it?"

"Oh, you don't mean then that I'd lose Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro—only call them—call them—mother and father?"

"Yes, Polly, they would be your legal mother and father, and you'd be their daughter."

The girl remained quiet for an instant, and then asked tremulously:

"Would they like it? Maybe they wouldn't want me to be their daughter."

"Ask them, Polly. They're here."

"Aunt Miranda!" she said timidly.

"Yes, dear."

Then Polly's ready tongue failed her; the sightless eyes filled suddenly with tears, and she stood trembling. Seeing her embarrassment, Miranda caught her in her arms, and whispered between embraces:

"Polly, will you be my—my daughter? Will you, Polly?"

"Oh, Aunt Miranda, I never expected this. I am bewildered. Do you want me? Could I call you 'mamma'? And Uncle Jethro 'papa'? I don't think it can be true. Tell me, is it true, Aunt Miranda? Do you want me?"

"Yes, dear, I do."

Polly was crushed in her arms until the

golden curls mingled with the soft gray hairs of her future mother. Jethro blew his nose, and finally said :

"I reckon, Polly, it's my turn now, ain't it?"

"Oh, Uncle Jethro," she cried, throwing her arms about his neck, "I think I must be dreaming. I'm to have a real papa and mamma! I shall die of ecstasies—yes, I know I will! Won't Dick be surprised, and Dolly! Poor Dick has only a mother, but he won't mind, do you think so? If so, I'll tell him that if he's good he may have another father some day. He could, couldn't he, Uncle Jethro?"

"Yes, I suppose he could," laughed Uncle Jethro. "Mary's middling young and good-looking. But I reckon Dick's satisfied with just his mother."

"I think he must be, but if he isn't, I'll tell him to be good, and he may get a father some day."

It was a joyous party that accompanied

Mr. Wilson to the train, and Billy galloped along rapidly, making the trip in good time, as if conscious of the changed relationship of his owners. While waiting for the train, Mr. Wilson took Uncle Jethro to one side, and said: "I'll have the adoption papers ready soon."

Uncle Jethro nodded. "The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned," he replied heartily.

"There's one more thing I want to speak about," the superintendent added, after a pause. "I hesitate mentioning it, for nothing may come of it—and yet ——"

Uncle Jethro stroked his beard in silence, showing some nervousness at the other's hesitancy. Was there some hitch in their plans after all?—some little uncertainty that might rob them of Polly at the last moment?

"You know, Mr. Baldwin," began Mr. Wilson gravely after what seemed a long pause, "science has made great advances in

recent years. What seemed almost miraculous five or ten years ago is an every-day achievement now. Only the other day I heard how a child who had been blind from birth received her sight through a difficult, but not dangerous, operation. The surgeons say that ——"

Jethro suddenly caught the drift of the speaker's words. An almost incredulous expression dawned on his face, and then one of amazement and eagerness.

"You mean," he said, grasping the arm of Mr. Wilson, "that—that there's a chance of Polly getting her sight if—if ——"

Mr. Wilson nodded. "A chance—a good chance, I should say. But, of course, it may fail, and we don't want to raise our hopes too high. Polly now would be terribly disappointed if ——"

Jethro did not permit him to finish. He took off his hat, rubbed his hot forehead vigorously with a red handkerchief, and exclaimed fervently:

"The Lord be praised! The Lord be praised!"

Then unable to restrain his emotions longer he abruptly left the superintendent, and rushed down the platform.

"Miranda! Miranda!" he shouted at the very top of his voice. "Miranda, come here! The day of miracles has returned!"

"Land sakes, Jethro!" exclaimed his wife. "You act as if you was ready to bust."

"I am, Miranda—ready to bust this minute if you don't listen."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOTHING was said to Polly then about the wonderful news which agitated the old couple, but they seemed so excited on their way back from the station that more than once the little girl seemed absorbed in deep thought. But she had no way of guessing at the truth, and she very naturally assumed that their changed relationship was responsible for the suppressed emotion of her future parents. She snuggled closer to them, and once raised the hand of Jethro to her lips, and said:

"Uncle Jethro, are you happy? Did you want a little girl so much?"

"You bet I did!" replied Uncle Jethro, and then to conceal his emotion he blew his nose and whipped up Billy.

Polly turned to Mrs. Baldwin, and added: "And you want me, Aunt Miranda?"

Mrs. Baldwin for reply hugged her to her breast and shed tears of joy on the white, upturned face.

A week later the papers for the formal adoption of Polly were received, and with them came a note from Mr. Wilson that set the old couple to talking and whispering in a manner that excited Polly's curiosity.

"Polly, you want to go to the city and visit Mr. Wilson?" Jethro finally asked, unable longer to conceal from her the important news.

Polly hesitated a little. "I'd like to visit Mr. and Mrs. Wilson," she said slowly. "They've been so kind to me. But"—and she hesitated again—"I like it better out here than in the city. This is home, you know."

"Yes, dear," replied Aunt Miranda, "and you will always live here, but Mr. Wilson

has sent us wonderful news, Polly, wonderful news."

"What is it, Aunt Miranda?"

The trust and confidence expressed in the face affected Miranda so that she had to gather the girl in her arms before she answered.

"Polly," she said slowly, "the Lord can do wonderful things. Sometimes his ways are hard to understand. But we must trust him, for he knows better than we do what's good for us."

Polly's hand trembled. "What do you mean, Aunt Miranda?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

"Your sight, Polly! Maybe the Lord now wants you to see all these beautiful things you've imagined—the flowers, the birds, the trees—everything."

The hand closed convulsively over the arm of the speaker. The face was white, and the lips trembling.

"He wants me to see?" she breathed

softly. "He will give me new eyes, and ——"

"No, not new eyes, Polly, but he may give you sight through the poor sightless things you have been so patient in enduring."

"Oh, Aunt Miranda!" exclaimed Polly, the tears streaming down her cheeks. But they were tears of joy.

Aunt Miranda for the first time showed symptoms of doubt. Had she aroused in the girl a great desire, which, if denied now, would make her affliction a thousand times worse?

"We don't know for sure, Polly," she added gently. "It may not be the Lord's will. We can't read his mind, and his way is not always our way. We must trust in him, and pray to him. Jethro and I will pray every moment from now on that—that it may be so."

As gently as possible, she then told Polly the plans they had made through Mr. Wilson

for an operation, dwelling repeatedly upon the chances of failure. They were to go to a private hospital in the city where the operation would be performed. When she was through, Polly clapped her hands.

"Oh, I know it will be successful!" she exclaimed. "I feel right now that the Lord is going to let me see. Yes, I know he will."

Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda were a little taken back by this childish faith, and they were both troubled by the thought that they had aroused too much hope in her mind. What if the operation should prove a failure! They shuddered at the thought of it.

But Polly had supreme faith. She began counting the days, always ending with the remark, "One more day gone! I'll soon see. I know the Lord intends to give me sight."

"I believe," Uncle Jethro said on the fifth day, "the Lord can't disappoint her now. Her faith will do it."

Mr. Wilson had everything prepared for them, and when they reached the city they went to the private hospital engaged beforehand. Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda were to spend the week as guests of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, but they only slept there, practically living in the corridors and office of the private hospital. It was a sore disappointment to both that they could not accompany Polly to the operating room, but this was both unwise and impracticable. Aunt Miranda grumbled continually at this separation, but Polly set her mind at rest.

"I'm not afraid, Aunt Miranda. But I want you there when I open my eyes and see for the first time."

"Lord bless you, Polly, I won't leave your bedside a minute soon's they'll let me in," fervently responded the woman.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

POLLY'S operation was not so very different from dozens of others that are performed nearly every day. She said good-bye to her foster parents and was wheeled away into the operating-room. Her faith was so strong and self-sufficient that never for a moment did she doubt.

Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro were not admitted to her presence until the second day after the operation, and then only for a few minutes at a time. Polly, propped up on the white bed, with heavy bandages across her eyes, received them with a smile. She was a little paler and a trifle thinner, but otherwise unchanged.

"I'm just trying to think what you'll look like, Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro," she said. "I know you must be beautiful. Yes, I know it."

A fortnight followed. Each day Polly grew stronger and happier. Did not each twenty-four hours mark one less day between darkness and light? She ate the nourishing food given her, listened to the stories of the nurses, and talked freely of the things she was soon to see.

The doctor shook his head approvingly. "Nothing could be better for her than that supreme faith," he remarked. "It's better than any tonic we could give her."

But if she couldn't see? If the eyes still refused to respond to the impulse of light rays? Even the nurses shuddered at the thought and tried to put it away from them. They dreaded the reaction that might follow. Poor little Polly! Could she stand such a disappointment?

When the hour arrived for removing the bandages, the room was darkened so that the weak eyes might not be injured by too great a flood of light. Two of the nurses were there—the night and the day nurse

—the surgeon who had performed the operation, and his assistant, and Uncle Jethro and Aunt Miranda. The hands of the surgeon trembled ever so slightly as he removed the last bandage. He had been present at many similar scenes, but none had affected him so strangely as this one.

"There, Polly, my little girl," he said gently, "you can open your eyes a little, but if the light hurts them, close them at once."

The eyelids fluttered open. The eyes that had gazed for so long at an unseen world of realities looked strange and unnatural to those watching them. An instant the eyelids remained open; then they trembled and closed spasmodically as if the light was too much for the eyes. A half-suppressed groan escaped Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro.

Polly stirred and the eyes opened again, closed, and once more opened. This time they remained open for so long that all in

the room held their breath in suspense. The eyes were staring up at the ceiling as if they saw nothing. The surgeon's face whitened a little, and the lips of one of the nurses trembled.

Then from the bed came a faint whisper, an awed gasp of wonder and surprise. "I can see!" Polly murmured softly. "Oh, I can see!"

The tension was broken, but no one spoke. The sense of relief was so great that the surgeon mopped his perspiring forehead vigorously.

Polly turned her head until Aunt Miranda's gray hairs came within range. A smile broke out on her face, and with a hand extended toward Mrs. Baldwin, she said confidently:

"Aunt Miranda, I see you!"

Then the eyes drifted a little to one side, and she added: "And you, Uncle Jethro. I know you! Yes, you look just as I thought you would."

"Polly!" exclaimed Aunt Miranda and Uncle Jethro in a breath as they leaned over and kissed the white cheeks. The girl, with sight restored, gazed fondly at them, searching every part of their features which had been made so dear to her by touch and a vivid imagination. They were an essential part of the world of beautiful things that she could henceforth see.

"I think, Aunt Miranda, the Lord is very good to me, don't you?" Polly murmured finally.

Mrs. Baldwin's answer was lost as she buried her face in Polly's neck. The nurses and doctors, after a nod to each other, stole quietly from the room, leaving the little girl alone with her well-loved new father and mother, who while life lasted were not likely to cease to be thankful that Polly came to Woodbine.

THE END